

THE BLACK HEART



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SYDNEY HORLER

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THE BLACK HEART

SYDNEY HORLER



HODDER AND STOUGHTON

*The characters in this book are entirely imaginary,
and have no relation to any living person.*

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To
H. RUSSELL STANNARD,
IN MEMORY OF THE DAYS
WHEN WE WENT LAUGHING
DOWN FLEET STREET.

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CHAP. I THE HOUSE OF A THOUSAND CHANCES

CHERTSEY, as he left the place, did not notice the slim form of the man who came gliding out of the shadows.

Such thoughts as he had were still with the feverish and hectic scene from which he had departed. He recalled the mock-commiserative look on the face of the *croupier*, as the man raked in his last throw : " Monsieur is unlucky to-night. To-morrow . . . who knows ? "

He had laughed at the moment. If there was one thing certain in this changing world, it was that he wouldn't return to the ironically-named gambling hell which went by the bizarre title of "The House of a Thousand Chances." It was not that he minded losing the money, but the show was so tawdry, so flatly boring, so enormously stale. There wasn't a thrill in a lifetime there. At least, that had been his experience, and he shouldn't go again.

Lighting a cigarette, the man who had just lost twenty thousand francs in a remarkably short space of time, shrugged his shoulders and walked at a quicker pace down the Grand Boulevard. Ten minutes at the Café de la Paix, and he would turn in.

By the time he had reached the Opera House, and

the glittering lights of the world-famous Cosmopolitan *rendezvous* could be plainly seen, the man shadowing the unfortunate gamester had been joined by another. No word was said by either, but the first man pointed with the elegant cane he was carrying, to the strolling figure in front, and his companion nodded. Although a close observer might have remarked on the tense expression on the faces of both these stalkers, they seemed to be in perfect agreement. They were used to shadowing men.

Still quite unconscious of the interest which his departure from the gilded gaming-den had occasioned, Gilbert Chertsey sat down at an unoccupied table outside the well-known café, and ordered a *capuccin*. Then, lighting another cigarette, he gave himself up to idle sight-seeing.

There was plenty to occupy his mind. The night was early for Paris—it wanted another twenty minutes to midnight—and the spacious boulevard was crowded. All the arresting types which go to make up the endless stream of humanity in perhaps the most fascinating city of the world, were to be seen strolling past—the immaculately-dressed *Boulevardier*, with an ever-appreciative eye for a pretty face (and there were many such on this sparkling early autumn night); the loose-lipped Apache, prowling like the human wolf he was, side by side with the type of pretentious art-student whom Chertsey had imagined was clean out of fashion; the trim-ankled, saucy-featured midinettes walking arm-in-arm, their day's work forgotten, greeting Life

with a merry, pealing laugh and ever ready to embark upon an adventure.

There were many nationalities besides the native French. A tall, blonde Russian had for his neighbour an inscrutable Japanese; sallow-tinted South Americans rubbed shoulders with Magyars and other brooding figures from the Central European States. Now and then, to add a splash of sombre colour to an already richly-variegated human palette, a loose-trousered Senegalese came lounging past, his rolling eyes avid with excited interest. The most intriguing woman in that varied parade was a half-caste negress.

A stimulating scene, and Chertsey was sitting in the front row of the stalls. Yet he frowned.

"Each one has a thundering good story tucked away inside him," he muttered, regarding the shifting crowd with steady eyes; "but how to get at it? Good Lord! In the heart of Paris . . . and I haven't an idea worth a damn . . . !" It seemed a melancholy reflection to this lean, fit-looking man of thirty, and he yawned, as though existence had become for him a desert of intolerable dreariness.

"Your pardon, M'sieur," remarked a voice at his elbow.

Chertsey turned to find that the other two seats at the small table were now occupied. The man who had addressed him was evidently the ponderous person with the huge black beard cut square. This man seemed to possess the typical Gallic quality of being a striking combination of mental alertness and physical strength. Beyond that summing-up, as

the result of a quick, casual look, Chertsey didn't allow himself to speculate. True, his glance also took in the ponderous person's companion, but as the latter seemed a thoroughly nondescript individual, having nothing at all remarkable about him, he paid no further heed.

After muttering a polite platitude in reply, he relapsed into his former brooding attitude. If he had not been so completely indifferent, he might have moved to another table. In the tumultuous days that followed, he often speculated why he did not do so.

"Your pardon, M'sieur, but have I not the pleasure of your acquaintance?" It was the bearded man again. These garrulous Frenchmen. . . .

"It is my misfortune, but I am afraid you haven't!" replied Chertsey, somewhat bluntly. What did this fellow want?

"Ten thousand pardons, M'sieur! It was my friend who suggested to me that he had seen you at play in the gaming-place which M. de Virgen, *le proprietaire* is pleased to call 'The House of a Thousand Chances.'"

Chertsey was too indolent-minded, and too indifferent to be offended. He smiled faintly upon the speaker.

"Yes, I played at 'The House of a Thousand Chances' to-night. But I did not observe your friend there."

The bearded man laughed deep down in his stomach.

"Thibau," he said, looking at the pale shadow a man who sat on his right; "he is not one that seen. But this Thibau, he notices; he is a rare e for noticing. . . . A million pardons if I lend again, M'sieur—but Thibau has told me that u lost heavily to-night?" The words were put the form of a question, with a rising inflection of e voice.

A flush crept slowly into Chertsey's face. The fernal impudence. . . . Then he smiled: if this low wanted to talk, let him talk. He might be iusing.

"I was quite cleaned out," he replied; "I left th just two francs. It will be sufficient to pay for y drink and a tip to the waiter. 'The House of a thousand Chances' was not rightly named in my case." The ponderously-built man with the square-cut ard looked at the pale shadow who was his mpanion. The latter's eyes flickered momentarily. "It is possible, M'sieur, that although 999 chances nt amiss in that house to-night, yet one—and, rhaps, who knows?—it may be a very good one m M'sieur's point of view—was provided."

This was puzzling, and what was even more puzzling Chertsey was the extraordinary look of absorption both the faces confronting him. He noticed with lazement that there were tiny beads of perspira-n on the forehead of the big man, which hadn't en there a minute before, whilst the nostrils of insignificant companion were distended through, doubt, the same mysterious sense of excitement.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of the whole business was that he actually felt himself being raised from the slough of unutterable boredom which had made his life for the past week an almost intolerable burden.

" You talk in riddles, M'sieur," he remarked, coldly. Although on the brink of being interested, he determined not to evidence any concern. By this means he would the more speedily get an idea of what was in the speaker's mind.

The man leaned further forward.

" M'sieur, I will speak more frankly. If you are offended, believe me, Thibau and I mean no offence. So ! I will tell you." He put both elbows on the table, his eyes gleaming and his very beard seeming to crackle with excitement.

" You have already said that you lost all your money at 'The House of a Thousand Chances' to-night ; that you were—what is the phrase ?—'cleaned out' : ah ! that is good ; 'cleaned out'" He laughed. " Well, my friend Thibau and I have a suggestion to make whereby you can replenish your empty pockets. I trust you are not offended, M'sieur ? "

Chertsey laughed. The man's earnestness was really comic. And yet he wanted to bestow largesse, not to receive it ! There must be something rummy in this. He would stay to listen.

" Certainly you haven't wounded me very deeply yet, my friend," he replied ; " tell me, briefly, what is your proposition ? "

Again the bearded man looked at his companion, and again the eyelids of that pale shadow flickered momentarily.

"M'sieur is young, handsome, no doubt of a romantic disposition?"

"Well?" encouraged Chertsey, half satirically.

The other rubbed his hands.

"Now we begin to understand each other. I have a proposition to make which will, I hope, appeal to you, M'sieur. It will be well paid, and you may—Thibau thinks it is highly probable—have certain adventures."

"In other words, the job is a dangerous one? There is even death in it, perhaps?"

The bearded man drew back before this very blunt comment.

"M'sieur has a quick mind," he replied, after another look at his silent companion; "but it travels too far. Death! That is an ugly word, M'sieur; I pray you not to use it. All we—Thibau and I—propose for you to do is to go to London and take up your residence in a certain house there that we shall name. For that, M'sieur, we pay you at once the sum of ten thousand francs."

Chertsey lit another cigarette. Really, this was getting better than he had supposed.

"And then what?" he asked. "I mean, what happens after I set up residence in this house? Do I just live happily ever after?"

"That is just what we shall desire you to do, M'sieur. And now," putting his hand into his

pocket, and pulling out a wallet, "may I have the pleasure ? "

"One moment ; you are in too much of a hurry." Gilbert Chertsey held up his hand.

"I should rather like to know," he said, "before we go any further, why you have sufficient trust in me, a perfect stranger, to hand over, for the most flimsy of reasons, the sum of ten thousand francs ? "

"M'sieur is a man of honour."

This time it was the pale, insignificant Thibau who spoke. He said the words with a note of finality, and as though there was nothing more to be added.

The man who had been paid the compliment, bowed. He had already made up his mind, but he did not think it would be politic to appear too anxious.

"M'sieur," he said, turning to the bearded giant, "I never come to a decision rashly. I will now go back to my hotel, sleep on your proposition, and meet you here again at eleven o'clock to-morrow morning, if that is agreeable ? "

The bearded one tried to hide a look of chagrin, but Thibau replied : "That will be entirely agreeable, M'sieur. At eleven, then—come, Lefarge."

As the two walked away, Gilbert Chertsey, just to be on the safe side, pinched himself to make sure he was awake.

IT was half an hour after midnight when he returned to his hotel. This expensive *caravanserai* was not the lodging that the average person would have selected for a ruined gambler, but Gilbert Chertsey appeared to have no qualms as he entered the lift which would take him to his room. He was entirely master of himself.

There was only one other occupant of the lift. This was a girl whose figure was enveloped in a long black, chiffon velvet cloak, cut very full. The collar of this, he noticed, was made of a soft black fur, and was so large that the girl's face, snuggled into it, looked like a tender bud protected by sheltering leaves.

One other thing Chertsey noticed: although so little of her could be seen, this girl was not only very beautiful, but she possessed a magnetic charm which was indescribable but very potent. Chertsey was particularly susceptible to impressions, and almost immediately he was conscious of this girl's vivid personality. Coming after his strange talk at the Café de la Paix, the sight of her completely jolted him out of his former boredom.

As the lift stopped at his floor, the girl stepped forward. He stood aside, hoping that this entrancing

person would vouchsafe him a glance. As she was staying in the hotel, he must do his best to get to know her the next day. Far from being a philanderer, and usually somewhat austere in his relations with women, he now felt that he would give almost anything to be able legitimately to make this girl's acquaintance. For once in his life he would not allow an absurd conventionality to stand in the way.

And then the girl passed him, looking straight in front! He might not have existed, so far as she was concerned.

Feeling hot about the collar rather than crest-fallen, Chertsey left the lift. It did not add to his peace of mind to know that the lift-boy was grinning behind his hand.

As he stepped out into the corridor, he saw that the girl was ahead of him and passing his room. While he looked, he noticed something white fall from her hand to the carpet. She hastened on, apparently unconscious of her loss.

Chertsey rushed forward. Here was the very chance for which he had been praying! Picking up the envelope—for this it proved to be—he overtook the girl.

"Pardon me, but you have dropped this."

She turned. Her eyes reminded him of violets with the morning dew on them. He felt a deep, strange, but wholly delightful thrill as she looked at him.

She took the envelope and glanced at it.

"But this does not belong to me," she said; "it is addressed to a Mr. Gilbert Chertsey."

"But—I thought—in fact, I was practically positive, that you had dropped it," stammered Chertsey.

"You can see for yourself . . ." She broke off to add: "I am not in the habit of carrying about letters which belong to someone else. I suggest that you inquire at the office for this Mr. Chertsey."

With that, and a very brief and cold smile, she was gone. Chertsey, feeling very much of a fool, was left holding a letter which—*was addressed to himself!*

Entering his room, he switched on the electric fire, lit a pipe and sat down to think. He was still bewildered, almost breathless with astonishment. The girl certainly had dropped that letter. Then why should she have temporised? He was glad she had not deliberately lied: to have proved her a liar would have been like a smack in the face. Yet—

He looked at the envelope,

Gilbert Chertsey, Esq.,

was written on it in small, but bold handwriting, which was full of character. Had the girl written it herself? She must have, he decided; otherwise: (1) why should she be carrying it, and (2) why should she drop it outside the very door of his room?

There were a good many other questions. How

did the girl know his name? He had never seen her before that night. Why should she wish to write to him? And, once having written, why did she endeavour to disown the act?

The first thing to do, he now decided, was to read what she had written to him. In a fever of impatience he tore open the envelope.

Inside was a small square white piece of paper. On this was written in the same handwriting, the words—

*Do not go to London. Great danger.
Destroy this.*

That was all. There was no signature; nothing by which the writer could be identified.

Chertsey put the paper down and softly whistled. This was Blind Man's Buff with a vengeance. Life, with a fine, calculated irony, had got back on him: only an hour or so before, he had bitterly complained that all the tang had gone out of existence; now he found himself the central figure in a veritable maze of mystery.

He fell to putting questions to himself again. It seemed a fool's trick, and a shocking waste of time, but nevertheless, he was compelled to do it.

These were the further questions he asked:

(1)—How could the girl possibly have known his name?

(2)—How could she have known that he was considering going to London?

(3)—What connection could this radiant creature possibly have with the bearded Lefarge and the pale shadow of a Thibau?

(4)—What—?

and then he gave it up. His brain was weary with so much surmise, and the top of his head throbbed in the same way as when he had been sticking to work too hard. The enigma must wait until the morning. Then he would see the girl and demand an explanation. No, not *demand*, hang it; he couldn't imagine her delivering up anything on demand. He would ask her ever so nicely and politely what she meant by sending mysterious warnings to complete strangers?

Just before he fell off into an uneasy sleep, the memory of the girl's voice came back to him. She was not French; she was English—or American. He was glad of that: it seemed a sort of bond between them.

Breakfasting early—and lightly, after the admirable French fashion—Chertsey signalled to the head waiter. He described the mystery girl, and asked her name.

Jules was desolated, but he could not recall such a one. Was Monsieur sure she was staying at the hotel?

"Almost as sure as that you are lying," was the swift reply.

The head waiter looked confused.

"Perhaps Monsieur will accompany me to the bureau," he said.

At the hotel office, Chertsey, stiffly determined now, repeated his description of the girl. The clerk in charge shook his head.

"There is no one of that description staying with us, M'sieur," he said.

"But I tell you I saw her in the lift last night. I saw her on the fourth floor——"

The clerk's face expressed astonishment, but he kept to his story.

"I regret exceedingly, M'sieur—but there is no lady of that description staying here. I will make inquiries and let you know." The manner of the speaker, respectful as it was, suggested that Chertsey must be suffering from a left-over impression of a wine-laden night.

Having apologised to the head waiter, Chertsey roamed the public rooms of the hotel until 10.30. Then, fetching his hat and stick, he strolled forth into the brilliant sunshine. But for the letter reposing in the inside breast pocket of his coat, he might have been inclined to think, so far as any actual evidence of her existence was obtainable, that the girl he sought was merely a creature of his over-excited fancy.

But that note of dramatic warning was real enough.

The two men he had arranged to meet were already at the Café de la Paix when he arrived. Lefarge rose and beamed expressively.

"It is delightful to see M'sieur again," he said, crooking a finger at a passing waiter. "Now, I

confess, I am all impatience to hear your decision. Thibau here, he says you will accept; but I—I have my doubts. M'sieur will be kind enough to remove that doubt?"

"I have decided to accept your offer, strange as it is," he replied.

The Heavily-Bearded One clapped his hands.

The Head of the important firm of London publishers—a tall, slim man, whose manners were most charmingly urbane—looked across the table at his visitor.

"There should be every inducement for you to write—and to keep on writing," he said; "as you know, your last four books have all been tremendous successes, not only with us but also with Mortlakes in America. The Colonial editions alone would satisfy the average novelist. You are still quite a young man, and you have the world at your feet. As a teller of romantic adventure tales, you have no equal: a big statement to make, considering how the bookstalls are groaning with so-called 'thrillers.' As your friend, as well as your publisher, Chertsey, let me ask: why are you so abominably lazy? Your next novel should be already in my hands—and you confess you haven't written a line of it! This is shocking sloth!" The speaker, whose greatest joy in life was to work at least sixteen hours out of every twenty-four, frowned as he lit a cigar.

The visitor laughed. It was not the laugh of a

guilty person. On the contrary, it was the laugh of a man with a perfectly clear conscience.

"The fact is, Sir William," he replied, "I've been stuck for an idea for months now. It seemed to me that practically everything in the sensational business had already been done to death—I couldn't get a line on anything that even looked like being new."

"How many plots are there?" asked the publisher, sententiously; "did not someone once say seven?"

"I know all about that, but until I *feel* a story, I cannot begin to write it."

"Which, of course, is why the sale of your novels has reached such highly satisfactory figures. But, all the same, I do implore you to start working again. If you could only get a start—"

"I think I have that," was the comment. "Look here, Sir William," the speaker went on, to the astonished publisher, "if anything should happen to me—"

The cigar dropped from Sir William Leverston's hand on to the handsome mahogany table. "My dear boy, what on earth do you mean? What *can* happen to you?"

"That's just what I am not very clear about myself. But, in case anything does, I should like you to know that I have appointed you my executor. Good-bye! Before long I hope to get down to work again."

Ignoring further appeals for enlightenment, the

extremely popular young writer of highly-coloured fiction, walked down the stairs into the teeming Strand.

The house—or rather, the flat—the address of which had been given him by the two mysterious men of Paris, was in a quiet Bloomsbury street. As he walked slowly down this peaceful-looking thoroughfare, Chertsey recalled the remark once made to him by one of the greatest imaginative writers of the day—Peplow, the American novelist.

"This Bloomsbury of yours, Chertsey, is one of the most fruitful fiction-fields in the world. Not only is there a novel in every house of it, but in every room of it!"

No doubt it was true. Forty-eight hours before, he would have laughed the suggestion to scorn, however. He had roamed the greater part of Europe in search of an idea for his next novel, and had failed. He had failed so badly that the horrible fear which haunts every writer had come to him. Was he written out? Was he dried up? A dreadful thought for the author of only four novels, good-sellers as all of these had proved.

He had been a desperate man on the night that he went to "The House of a Thousand Chances" in the Rue de Napoleon. To any one who had come up to him and suggested an acceptable idea for a novel, he would cheerfully have given one hundred pounds.

Instead, those strange persons, Lefarge, the Ponderous, and Thibau, the Pale Shadow, had

suggested that he should live a drama instead of writing one. That was the sole reason why he had accepted the bizarre proposal which had been made him. It was not the ten thousand francs : he had a sufficiency of money.

Arrived outside the house, he looked up at the windows. The flat he was to occupy was on the second floor, he understood. These windows—three in number—were neatly curtained. There was an air of almost ultra-respectability about them.

On the way up the stairs, he took from his pocket the key which Lefarge had given him. The door of the flat was painted a deep green—again that note of respectability !

He had been told that there would be no one in the flat by the time he arrived, but he rang nevertheless. When the second peel was negative of result, he inserted the key, opened the door, and stepped inside.

A pleasant smell of fresh flowers met him, and the first impression he had was that this place had recently been lived in ; it had not been shut up and neglected.

He found himself in a small entrance-hall—a space just large enough to contain a table, a chair and a hat-stand.

Leading from the hall were two doors, one on either side.

Having taken off his hat and light overcoat, which he hung on the hall-stand, Chertsey proceeded with his investigations. Turning the handle of the door

on the right, he walked into a small apartment, furnished in quiet, good taste as a dining-room. Two comfortable leather chairs flanked the hearth, and the other furniture appealed. He felt that, given no unruly interruptions, he might be very comfortable in this place. It compared quite favourably with his own chambers in Clarges Street.

Going out into the hall again, he crossed to the room on the other side. This, as he supposed, proved to be a bedroom.

This room also was agreeably furnished. The walnut suite was of good quality and the bed looked clean and inviting.

Leading from the bedroom was a small bathroom, the appointments of which were pleasing to the eye.

From the window of the bathroom he caught sight of a fire-escape in the form of a long iron staircase leading down to the garden, which was a large one for Central London.

The investigator hummed as he lit a cigarette. So far the adventure had been pleasant enough. A hundred questions pressed on his mind, but he decided to dismiss them—for the present, at any rate.

Returning to the bedroom, he took a cursory glance through the drawers in the dressing-table. They were all empty.

"The former owner has evidently cleared out," Chertsey told himself, as he went over to a large wardrobe which stood along the wall to the left of the inviting-looking bed.

He opened the door nonchalantly, but the next moment he drew back, his heart thudding against his ribs.

Huddled in a corner of the wardrobe was a man.

A look of indescribable horror was imprinted on his face.

Unmistakably he was dead.

As Chertsey bent to look more closely, the corpse, disturbed by the opening of the door, tumbled forward and fell with a crash at his feet.

CHERTSEY stood motionless. He could hear his heart beating. The small room was filled with a silence that each second grew more impressive. From the two-hundred-yards distant Russell Square came faintly the sounds of Life : the hooting of taxi-horns, the muffled roar of the city's traffic : striking contrasts to the Thing sprawling at his feet which was—Death !

He was still unable to move. Horror had gripped him. The quickened flow of blood thundered in his temples. This was the first time he had ever seen a murderer's victim.

Who was this man ? What was he doing in the flat ? Was he the former occupier ? Who had killed him ?—and why ? The questions nearly swept him off his mental balance.

Then a healing calmness came. His sense of manhood reasserted itself. A man had been foully murdered, and it was his duty to see that justice was done.

But what was he to do ? The obvious thing, of course, was for him to rush out into the street, seize the nearest policeman by the arm and drag him back to that room of horror. But—

Chertsey sat down. He felt stunned—and inclined

to be sick. He realised suddenly that he couldn't inform the police. He had no desire to be identified with this Thing whose face stared up at him horrifically. Unable to look at it, he conquered his nausea with an effort, and placed the corpse back in the wardrobe.

Then he tried once again to think.

But any coherent thought proved impossible. Only one fact emerged clearly from his rioting emotions : that, if he were discovered there, he would probably be charged with the crime. In any case, an explanation would be demanded—and what explanation could he give ? Would the amazing story he proffered be believed ?

Now that the body was out of sight, his wits slowly returned. Since he could not inform the police, he must remain in the flat and await developments. That there would be developments was certain. It seemed impossible to doubt that the murderers would come back. This had been no ordinary crime ; nothing in the flat had been disturbed, for instance. Burglary or robbery could not have been the motive.

Then, what—?

Very distinctly came a knock on the flat door.

Chertsey braced himself. Now that some action promised, he felt more able to cope with the situation.

Carefully shutting the wardrobe door he walked into the hall.

“ Who is that ? ”

The answer was commonplace.

“ The hall-porter, sir.”

Still he hesitated.

"What do you want?"

"I have a letter for you, sir."

With that Chertsey opened the door. A man in a dark uniform stood outside. He had an envelope in his hand. This he extended.

"Who gave you this?"

"A young lady, sir. Very handsome, sir—got out of a taxi."

Chertsey's head was whirling, but he kept his voice steady.

"The young lady didn't give you any name?"

"No, sir. Just handed me the letter which she said I was to give to you at once, and then got into the taxi again, and drove off."

Chertsey put his hand into his pocket and pulled out half-a-crown.

"Thank you, porter," he said.

"Thank you, sir."

"One more question: How did you know my name?"

"Mr. Betterson, of the firm of house-agents, Messrs. Ross and Winton, came round this morning to tell me that a gentleman by your name, sir, had taken this particular flat."

"I see." The remark was merely mechanical. As a matter of fact, he was more befogged than ever—the mystery had deepened instead of clearing.

"That is all, porter."

"Thank you, sir." Touching his hat, the man turned away.

Freshly bewildered, Chertsey closed the door and went into the sitting-room—he preferred the sitting-room!—and looked at the letter.

On the envelope, in a script that was full of character, and which seemed vaguely familiar, were written the words—

Gilbert Chertsey, Esq.,

He tore it open and read :

“Never mind anything. Tell the porter you are tired with your journey, that you are going to bed—that you must on no account be disturbed.

“Outside your bathroom window is a fire-escape. Leave by this, and take a 'bus to Piccadilly Circus. I will meet you at six o'clock outside the Ophir Steamship Company's offices, in Lower Regent Street.

“I am still doing my best to enable you to escape from your folly.

“The Girl Who Warned You.”

Chertsey leaned back, the piece of notepaper hanging from his fingers. No wonder the handwriting had seemed familiar.

“The Girl Who Warned You.” Presumably, she expected him to remember her. Although she had made such an impression upon him in those few fleeting moments two nights before, he wondered whether he would definitely be able to recognise her again. He had seen so little of her face, although

her figure had been noticeable for its bewildering grace.

Then she *had* dropped that note of warning in the corridor of the Hotel Vendôme.

But why had she dissembled?

It was difficult to think that a girl of such charm and distinction could be an adventuress. Yet, was this second note just a trap? Perplexed, he found himself disturbed at the thought that the girl he had met in Paris was in any way connected with this baffling and sinister mystery.

Then, swiftly, Chertsey shrugged his shoulders. He was becoming absurdly sentimental over a perfect stranger.

But, as he stood up, he experienced a sense of excitement which struck him as being odd. He thrilled to a memory—a memory of a rounded cheek and the unforgettable beauty of a pair of violet eyes. . . .

The next minute he was talking to the hall-porter.

"I am going to bed and do not wish to be disturbed. I crossed from the Continent to-day, and I am very tired."

"Very good, sir. If anyone should call?"

"Ask them to fix an appointment. In any case, I do not want to be bothered until to-morrow morning."

"Quite so, sir. What time would you like breakfast? And I do a little valeting for the other gentlemen—should you require it?"

"I will remember that—what is your name, by the way?"

"Parks, sir."

"Well, Parks, I'll have breakfast served at nine o'clock to-morrow morning—until then I do not wish to be disturbed."

"Very good, sir."

The man gone, Chertsey locked the flat door on the inside, put the key in his pocket, took down his hat and coat, and then, mastering that profound sense of nausea, walked through to the bedroom.

Closing the bathroom door behind him, he quietly opened the window and stepped out upon the iron staircase.

For a moment he hesitated, and then, as the autumn darkness closed about him, he went his way slowly down and down. It seemed a long way to the ground.

He, a writer of romantic frivol, was going himself into an adventure—an adventure which had started with meeting the corpse of a murdered man, and would end, God only knew where.

But a girl's eyes were leading him on.

CHERTSEY, having traversed the neglected garden and climbed the wall at the other end, found himself in a long, straggling, narrow lane.

This was in darkness, but, looking to the right, he saw the reflection of a street standard ; and, using the faint illumination as a guide, he shortly emerged into the purlieus of Russell Square.

A glance at his watch showed that he had only ten minutes in which to keep his appointment.

One advantage of London is that there is always a superfluity of taxi-cabs. The latter are cumbersome, unprofitable to run, and, consequently, the charges are abominably high ; but the man in a hurry has a certain consolation : he need never be kept waiting.

This was Gilbert Chertsey's experience now : he had been standing for only a few seconds before a cab, with a driver at the wheel who might have been a lineal descendant of Tony Weller, swooped down upon him.

" Taxi, sir ? " inquired a hoarse voice out of a monstrously red and mottled face.

" Ophir Steamship Company's offices, Lower Regent Street—quickly, please ! "

" Right y'are, sir ! "

The next moment the car glided smoothly away, the mottled god in the machine showing that marvellous skill in avoiding collisions which is such a marked characteristic of the London taxi-driver.

" 'Ere y'are, sir ! " Tony Weller's blood relation announced proudly, five minutes later.

After tipping the driver with such liberality that the man actually expressed gratitude—a sufficiently unusual occurrence in London—Chertsey looked around him.

A hundred yards to his right, Piccadilly Circus frothed and seethed—the centre of the world was having one of its rush-hours—but he enjoyed comparative quietude where he stood. Heavily laden 'buses rumbled and thundered past, cars sped by at breathless speed ; but, compared to the traffic-din a short distance away, this was an oasis of sound.

To his left stretched Pall Mall, and, beyond again, the stately dignity of the Mall and St. James's Park.

It was a familiar enough scene. He must have sauntered down this same street hundreds of times. Nothing exciting or even eventful had ever happened to him in it. One of his favourite booksellers, Hugh Rees, was just opposite, and behind him, as he stood waiting, was the huge emporium for American magazines, which he was in the habit occasionally of visiting—but these formed the only sources of interest he had ever found in this matter-of-fact thoroughfare.

It struck him that he must have changed into another personality—this man waiting could not be his ordinary self. And not only himself, but the spirit of this accustomed scene, must have changed. This could not be the London he knew—stimulating enough, but certainly not dangerous. Dangerous? The idea was ridiculous.

And yet, against this prosaic and familiar background of humdrum, hurrying city life, he saw with startling vividness, the distorted face of the dead man he had left behind in the wardrobe of that Bloomsbury bedroom.

He half turned to the left. A short walk would bring him to the Headquarters of the London Police. Scotland Yard might look at him suspiciously after he had told his story, but surely they would not charge him with the murder of that unknown man? There were persons of position in London—Sir William Leverston, for instance—who would willingly testify that he was incapable of committing such a crime.

He had actually taken a step forward when a taxi swerved swiftly towards the pavement, and a passenger stepped out.

Instantly the resolve which had possessed him a moment before, vanished. For, directly, he had an amazing revelation: this girl of the Hotel Vendôme had become an integral part of his future life. She was necessary to him; future existence was impossible without her.

So real, so convincing was this impression that

he did not consider how absurd such an hypothesis really was: he only knew that this feeling was intuitive, and that it sprang from some inner consciousness of which he had been entirely unaware before. It was a vital truth.

He went impulsively forward to meet her, as she turned after paying the taxi-driver.

"Thank God, you've come!" he heard himself saying.

He did not know why he used these words—astonishing words in the circumstances. The only consciousness he had was tremendous pleasure in seeing this mystery-girl again. Apart from that one circumstance, his thoughts were so confused at the revelation which had come to him that any coherent reasoning was impossible.

"Something has happened to you? Something serious?"

Her voice was low, grave, but it had a musical intonation which made it very fascinating. Chertsey could not keep his eyes off her face—a perfect oval of womanly beauty, strengthened and redeemed from mere mechanical charm by character and personality. Utterly feminine, yet holding a quality which he had never noticed in the face of any other woman he had ever seen.

He stammered whilst he still looked at her.

"Not to me—to someone else."

His companion gave a quick glance round.

"We cannot stay here—we may be seen. I will take you somewhere——"

The rest of the sentence was lost, for she had swiftly turned.

Together they crossed the wide street, the girl a little in front. Already she had assumed control, and taken command.

She led the way to Jermyn Street—a thoroughfare which now appeared to Chertsey for the first time to have a subtly-sinister atmosphere, with its mixture of expensive hotels and restaurants and mean little shops—and then turned down an alley-way which led to that curious region beyond. Suddenly she stopped.

Over a basement-entrance hung a sign—

Lavonia : Teas.

Who, or what, Lavonia might be, Chertsey had no chance of inquiring, for his companion, with the briefest glance at him, led the way down the basement steps.

Directly he passed the main door of the place, Chertsey was greeted by a blast of warm, perfumed air. It titillated his senses and excited his curiosity.

Then he saw that a woman was standing in front of his companion, and that she was smiling a set smile.

The face of the woman was hard and repellent, in spite of its pretence to some sort of beauty. She was dressed neatly and becomingly in a blue coat-frock. The skirt of this was startlingly abbreviated; it reached barely to the knee.

Below the knee—Chertsey noticed with a stare of

bewilderment—were a pair of extremely shapely legs, exquisitely hosed. Yet this woman, who apparently managed this tea-room, was no flapper ; she was forty if she were a day. Two younger women—presumably waitresses—passed : these also specialised in extremely shapely limbs.

" Will Moddom please follow me ? " inquired the woman.

She led the way forward. Chertsey, following close at the heels of the mystery-girl, noticed that this underground café consisted of a number of very secluded alcoves, all dimly illuminated. He followed his companion's example in seating himself in one of these.

" Coffee ? " the manageress repeated ; " certainly, Moddam."

The shapely legs, so generously displayed, glided away, leaving Chertsey stupid with astonishment. He knew that such dens as " Lavonia : Teas " existed, not only in the West-end but in the city—but that this girl should be apparently familiar with a café of this character—and that she should have selected such a *rendezvous* . . .

" My time is very short, and I have a good deal to say. Please, Mr. Chertsey, endeavour to look a little less startled, and tell me everything that has happened since I saw you in the corridor of the Hotel Vendôme at Paris. But first, please, why did you not take my advice ? "

Her mode of speech, thrilling as was her voice, stung him.

" If I remember rightly, you denied dropping that note."

She swept the statement away with a little impatient gesture.

" How can I hope to convince you ? " she replied, quickly ; " but—don't waste any more time—tell me what I want to know ! "

" You have me rather at a disadvantage," he started to plead, impressed in spite of the warning of his native common-sense.

The girl leaned across the small table. There was a light in the violet eyes. A truant wisp of chestnut hair, escaping from the bondage of the small black hat, brushed the rounded cheek.

" Do you realise that by your foolhardy action you have placed yourself in the power of the most dangerous men in Europe ? " she said, in a voice tense with feeling.

Chertsey leaned back. On the surface it was all so fantastic, so preposterous. This was the atmosphere of Baghdad, not of London. Yet the girl regarding him with those steady eyes was vitally real : he was conscious of some of her magnetism passing through him.

" Who are these men ? —and what should they want with me ? " he asked.

" Tell me first what has happened since you left Paris," she parried.

Only a second's doubt remained with him. Then the personality of the girl swept any mental questioning aside.

" I——" he started.

His companion lifted a warning finger.

A waitress brought a small tray, on which were cups, a pot of coffee and a jug of hot milk. She flashed Chertsey a mischievous glance as she placed the things on the table.

" Drink some—it will allay any suspicion."

Chertsey had ceased to wonder by this time. He helped his companion, then poured out a cup for himself. He sipped the hot drink while impatience gnawed him.

" Now," said his companion.

" I am a novelist," Chertsey replied; " a writer of romantic, highly-coloured nonsense. It is popular, however, and it enables me to live the kind of life I like.

" Recently I should have started a new novel. But a central idea eluded me; everything in the sensational line had been exhausted. I could not get my plot.

" It was annoying because I am under contract to my publishers—most delightful people—and I like to keep my obligations. Day after day passed, and still I could not find anything in my imagination worth wasting paper on. Does this bore you ? " he stopped to ask.

He received a totally different reply from what he expected.

" I am very interested," the mystery-girl said; " please don't break off again." Momentarily, the tension had gone out of her voice and face.

"Paris is popularly supposed to be a city of queer happenings. I went there to soak in some atmosphere, and to endeavour to pick up a thread of that very elusive plot I wanted. Paris, however, seemed a desert—the papers were dull, the people I met were duller, and the private detective to whom I was introduced by a French journalist, the dullest man I ever met—and I despaired.

"Then, the hall-porter in my hotel came to my rescue, giving me the address, and what was more important, a card of introduction to a gaming-house in the rue Napoleon, not far from the Grand Boulevard.

"The place had such a picturesque name—it was known as 'The House of a Thousand Chances'—that I began to have some hope; but, beyond losing nearly twenty thousand francs, nothing happened to stir my torpid mind. I was bored stiff.

"But, leaving the place, I must have been shadowed——"

Into the face of his companion came that tense expression again.

"I know what followed," she said. "At the Café de la Paix two men got into conversation and made you a certain offer."

"Yes. It was the most amazing proposal I have ever heard. If I agreed to go immediately to London and take up my residence in a certain Bloomsbury flat, I was to receive the honorarium of ten thousand francs, the promise of much subsequent wealth, and possible adventures." Chertsey broke off to smile grimly.

"And you have had an adventure?" inquired the girl.

"My God, yes! Almost the first thing I saw when I reached this flat at 712, Guildford Street, was the body of a dead man concealed in a wardrobe. By all appearances he had been poisoned."

"Describe this man, please," breathlessly commanded the girl.

"His age, I should say, was roughly about forty-five. He was dressed in a well-cut blue suit, but beyond one facial characteristic, there was nothing by which to distinguish him from ten thousand other middle-aged men."

"What was this facial characteristic?"

Chertsey gave her back look for look. She met his scrutiny steadfastly.

"It is vitally important that I should know," she said.

He hesitated no longer. However mysterious was the atmosphere by which this girl was surrounded, he had to believe in her.

"The man," Chertsey explained, "had a curious deep cleft or dimple in his chin. It reminded me of the core of an apple—something which I wanted to cut out. Horrible notion, considering the man was dead, no doubt—"

"One cannot control one's thoughts. You say you found this man dead in a wardrobe in the bedroom of the flat. Was anything disturbed?"

"No—that was the curious part about it. Everything in the place was in perfect order, even to

freshly-arranged flowers! But, so far as I could see, all the belongings of the former owner—if this dead man was he—had been moved out before I arrived. Tell me, Miss —” He paused, but she did not supply the name; “what does it all mean?”

The girl poised her chin on the palm of a beautifully shaped left hand.

“I have an idea,” she replied, abstractedly, “but it is too early for me to say yet—too early—” The voice trailed away as the speaker’s thoughts obviously occupied her full attention.

“You can surely tell me something more than that,” persisted Chertsey. “You see,” he went on, “this thing on which I started more or less as a joke, has turned out unexpectedly tragic. I thought this adventure, absurd and bizarre as it sounded, might give me an idea for my novel.”

The girl interjected the remark: “And now, instead of writing mystery, you are living it?”

“I am—by Jove!”

Then there was silence, as both became occupied with their own thoughts.

Chertsey, still in a maze, felt some doubts returning. The girl had purposely refrained from mentioning her name or giving him practically any confidence in return. Had he been too precipitate?

“Listen, Mr. Chertsey.” His companion had broken in upon his reflections. “When you were in Paris, I gave you that warning because I felt that you were running blindly and foolishly into a position

of great danger. Although you were a complete stranger, I felt it my duty to try to save you. But now—”

“ Yes ? ” said Chertsey, eagerly.

Every word this girl uttered increased his impatience and stimulated his already overwhelming sense of curiosity.

“ The present situation is this,” resumed the mystery-girl, with a note of finality. “ England—perhaps the whole of Europe—is threatened with a great peril. Chance has placed you in the position of possibly being able to avert a tremendous catastrophe. The question is : are you willing to take the enormous risk which such a task would necessarily involve ? ”

Chertsey leaned towards her.

“ I must know something about you before I answer that,” he rejoined ; “ forgive me, but what connection have you with this business—which sounds like an opium-smoker’s delirium ? ”

She shook her head.

“ I cannot tell you that. It is natural that you should ask, I know—but all I can say at the moment is that I am possibly the only person in London to-night, outside the men who are endeavouring to bring political ruin to the nation, who realises to what extent England is in danger. Will that satisfy you ? ”

“ It must, if you won’t tell me any more.”

“ I can tell you this.” The speaker’s eyes glowed, and her voice became quietly resonant. “ One of

the greatest conspiracies against the peace of the world is now being hatched—part of it here in the West-end of London, part in Paris, part in Berlin, with ramifications, no doubt, in many other capitals of Europe.

" You doubtless wonder at me, a mere girl, knowing this. Let my answer be that, for a reason which I do not intend to explain now, I am interested in a great many things which are closely guarded secrets. Otherwise, how should I have known of the offer which those two men in Paris who called themselves Lefarge and Thibau made to you? How should I have known, also, of the moment of your arrival at 712, Guildford Street? "

The listening man nodded.

" You mystify me," he confessed, " but I will not interrupt by asking you any unnecessary questions. Tell me something more about this conspiracy? "

His companion withdrew a small gold case from the costly handbag she carried, and lit a cigarette.

" I have only shreds of evidence upon which to go," she replied, " but I feel sure I am right. For months past I have been travelling, to try to confirm my suspicions. In a flat in the Regensburger Strasse of Berlin, I heard something which set me thinking; this received corroboration in an underground dance-hall of Vienna. From there I went to Munich, and from Munich to Trieste. The trail here narrowed and I rushed back to Paris. It was there I saw you."

Chertsey pulled at the cigarette which he had accepted from the small gold case.

"And this plot, you say, is directed against England?" he asked.

He received an astonishing reply.

"Don't let this man coming towards us see you!" the girl whispered, tensely; "drop something and be a long time picking it up!"

The novelist's fountain pen fell to the floor.

SO magnetic had this girl's influence become that Chertsey had obeyed the strange request unhesitatingly. His fingers as he stooped touched the fountain pen, but he pushed it further under the seat, so that a moment or so later he was on all fours endeavouring to retrieve the emblem of his trade.

"That will do," he heard a voice say; "you can look up now."

He emerged from his semi-retirement, looking hot and feeling something of a fool.

"You rather overdid it," was his reward, "but the essential thing was the man in question did not notice your face. If he had seen you talking to me, it might have been very awkward for you subsequently."

Chertsey contrived a smile.

"You make me feel like a very small boy," he protested; "can't you stop doing that?"

"I was serious when I said that. The person who just passed is, without any exaggeration, the worst man in London—a creature of infinite evil. Incidentally, he owns this place. He doesn't know me—at least," with a determined flick of cigarette ash, "I hope he doesn't—but I know him." The lines of her mouth hardened.

"Has this man anything to do with my possible future employers?"

His companion sent him a swift glance.

"Does that mean that you are going to carry on?" she asked.

"Yes,—of course. You see, I happen to believe what you have just told me, incredible though it sounds; and if I can do anything, naturally I'm going to have a shot. It would help me, however, if you were able to give me just a hint of what you think these gentry's game is with me."

"I am afraid I cannot do that. You must discover it for yourself."

He frowned.

"There is the question of that corpse to be considered; I had thought of going to the police."

She answered sharply, almost impatiently.

"This is beyond the police. It is entirely out of the region of the ordinary detective. These men would laugh at the police." Her tone was decisive.

"There is not sufficient evidence to take to the police, even if that course was advisable—which I do not think." She continued. "Remember, I myself have only the slenderest of clues, and it is solid facts that are wanted.

"But you have a wonderful opportunity; you will be in the heart of the conspiracy. You can watch and learn. Above all, if you hear any mention of The Black Heart——"

"The—what?" asked Chertsey.

"The Black Heart," repeated the girl in a whisper, and then sat bolt upright.

From somewhere near came the sound of a woman's scream; then some shuffling, and after that a murmur of deep voices.

Her short skirt tossing wildly to and fro, the woman who had greeted them upon entering, now rushed into the alcove. In spite of its make-up, her face was sickly and pallid.

"Get out!" she cried. "Quickly!—or they'll nab you!"

In that moment of fresh perplexity, Gilbert Chertsey looked at his companion.

That astonishing girl did not fail him.

"The police must have made a raid," she said, with remarkable calmness; "we shall have to get away."

She stood up, and caught his arm.

"If we follow that woman, we ought to be all right."

Even now there was scarcely a ripple of excitement in her voice, and Chertsey marvelled afresh.

There were scurrying sounds from the adjoining alcoves.

Suddenly, like the falling of a tropical night, a dense blackness enveloped them—a hireling of the place must have turned off the main electric light switch.

In front of them they could hear the pattering heeltaps of the fleeing woman; behind them came

the deep curses of the police officers as they stumbled awkwardly in the darkness. Used to sensations as he was by now, Chertsey felt that this was another moment robbed from a nightmare.

"Quickly! . . .

A hand, cool, reassuring, firm in its clasp, was slipped into his. Thus united the mystery-girl and himself blundered forward.

After a few minutes that seemed hours. Chertsey blinked. The light was on again.

"There're two!—get at 'em!"

In a second, Chertsey's mind had been able to sum up the situation. He stood in front of the girl, at the back of whom was a door. This was resisting all her efforts to open it.

Two heavily built men, unmistakably police-officers in plain clothes, sprang forward at the bidding of the sergeant-major-like individual who had barked the command.

Behind him, Chertsey could still hear the girl endeavouring to open the door. He might have been mistaken, but he imagined that his companion had uttered a short cry of despair.

The sound, imaginary or real, played havoc with his usual equable temperament. He felt like a man driven mad through desperation.

The first police-officer was now so near that he could see the coarse texture of his skin. Beneath the bowler-hat trickled beads of perspiration. The man's lips were parted in a snarl, showing broken and discoloured teeth.

Chertsey felt not only mad, but disgusted. Acting on an impulse he could not control, he hurled his clenched fist into that unpleasant face, heard an oath being snapped off short, and then, to his surprise, the man staggered back and crashed to the floor.

The next moment he felt himself seized violently from behind, and jerked backwards. There was a rush of cold air, and a clangling sound as though a heavy door had been hurriedly slammed.

Then came a nauseating pain in the head. After that—oblivion.

The next thing he remembered was opening his eyes to see a man staring fixedly at him.

Of all the astonishing events of the last few hours, nothing seemed quite so remarkable as looking into the face of this man.

The latter was perhaps sixty years of age, but his skin had the clear, fresh look of one in the very prime of life. Immaculately tended hair of a startling whiteness, abundant in growth, surmounted a high classical forehead.

It was the face of a saint, all but the eyes—but, as he looked into these, Chertsey felt that the man before him must be a fiend. . . . Those deep-set eyes were sinks of iniquity. . . .

The worst man in London!

The description which had sounded so incongruous when it fell from the lips of the mystery-girl, now seemed aptness itself. In spite of the

striking beauty of the rest of this man's face, those eyes could not lie. . . .

"In endeavouring to save you from what might have been an embarrassing situation, I, unfortunately, caused you to knock your head. You will forgive the clumsiness, I trust?"

It was a remarkable voice, clear and sweet in utterance. It reminded Chertsey in some curious way of a silver bell.

"But you have fully recovered now!" continued the speaker; "the inquisitive persons who so crudely forced an entrance have gone, and you will be able to depart without apprehension."

In spite of the blow he had received, the situation made Chertsey clear-headed.

"To whom have I the pleasure of speaking?" he asked.

"My name is Sylvester Lade," responded the other.

"You own this place?"

Sylvester Lade nodded.

"It is one of my commercial undertakings," he remarked with a brief smile.

Chertsey rose, preparing to go.

"Well, I have to thank you, Mr. Lade. I must admit I didn't altogether fancy being hauled into a police-court." He did not add that he was innocent of any crime himself. He was curious to hear what the other would reply.

"What was the object of the raid?" he asked, when Lade kept silent.

The man with the evil eyes shrugged his immaculately-clad shoulders.

"They made me some paltry excuse to the effect that they were looking for a notorious criminal. Just now, London, it seems, is the chosen meeting-place for a number of dangerous characters." Again a fugitive smile passed over the aesthetic face.

Sylvester Lade then stepped forward

"One moment before you go, Mr——"

"Gilbert Chertsey is my name."

"The novelist?"

Chertsey bowed.

The worst man in London extended his hand.

"I am delighted to make your acquaintance, Mr. Chertsey. I have long been an admirer of your brilliant work." He paused, and over those dreadful eyes the lids closed like hoods. "And you are staying in London now?" he went on.

"Yes—at 712, Guildford Street."

Chertsey decided to risk a great deal by one bold stroke. But the only reward he received was an enigmatic smile.

"Indeed! I am very fond of Bloomsbury myself; I regard it, in spite of its faded splendour, as one of the most interesting districts of London."

"Look here, Mr. Lade," said Chertsey, spurred by sudden recollection, "I want to ask you about the lady I was with. Did she get away?"

The lids opened.

"To my regret, she did," was the reply.

"To your regret? She was a friend of mine—we came here together."

"Quite so. But you were not aware that she was a police-spy, I hope, Mr. Chertsey?"

"I certainly wasn't!" The novelist felt hot about his ruined collar. His hands were opening and shutting. He had an overwhelming and almost insane desire to seize this human reptile by the throat and squeeze the noxious life out of him.

"London is a strange place, and we learn many things in time, Mr. Chertsey." There was not only a subtle if suave sarcasm in the words, but they seemed to carry warning.

Chertsey went hotter.

"I absolutely refuse to believe that the lady in question has anything to do with the police, Mr. Lade." His instinctive hatred of the man made him speak with some heat.

The other asked in his flute-like voice: "A criminal then, perhaps?"

"No!—nor a criminal! Excuse me, but I must be going." The air had become stifling; delicate perfumes such as only women should use were wafted to him with every movement made by Sylvester Lade.

"I hope to have the pleasure of meeting you again, Mr. Chertsey," said the latter. He fondled a ring on the little finger of his left hand as he spoke.

"Are you interested in stones?" he asked, holding up this hand; "personally, onyx has always had a special appeal to me."

Chertsey, had he used less self-control, would have been bound to make some exclamation of surprise ; the stone in the ring shown to him was black in colour—and was shaped like a heart.

He mastered himself.

"A black heart," he commented ; "does it represent anything ?"

Sylvester Lade came nearer.

"Perhaps," he said ; "perhaps, soon, you may be given an opportunity of learning what it represents. But,"—the gentle voice became steely—"in any event, believe me, it would be very inadvisable for you to have any further association with the young lady we have been discussing."

"Good advice is always valuable, Mr. Lade." The irony in Chertsey's voice caused the other to stare. But he made no comment, opening a door which led from this room, that apparently served the purpose of an office.

Outside was a short passage, and at the end of this a flight of stone steps led upwards.

A couple of minutes later, Chertsey found himself in the street.

He took off his hat to wipe his forehead. It was still only seven o'clock, and he had the rest of the evening before him.

The first thing to do was to get a bath. After that, a change of clothes, and then something to eat ; the strain to which he had been subjected during the past few hours had made him ravenously hungry.

It was because these feelings of the primitive man predominated, that he turned instinctively towards Piccadilly. In that moment, he longed for the seclusion and comfort of his own rooms in Clarges Street.

Arrived outside his chambers, he let himself quietly in, and ran lightly upstairs to the first floor. As he looked round the well-remembered scene, after entering, the thought of his recent experiences took on the character of a disordered dream.

Although he had sent no message home, everything was in its usual admirable order, and it was with a sigh of contentment that he turned on the hot water tap to fill the bath.

It was while he was luxuriating in the steaming "tub" that a knock came on the door.

"Is that ever you, Mr. Chertsey, sir?" The voice belonged to the estimable Mrs. Chandler, who combined the duties of housekeeper, landlady and foster-parent, with such marked credit to herself and enviable comfort to the novelist.

The sound plunged Chertsey so far back into his normal life that he chuckled.

"It's all right, Mrs. Chandler. I came back unexpectedly, and didn't want to disturb you. I'll tell you a secret: I'm fiendishly hungry, but I hurried home because I prefer your cooking to that of any chef in London. You've got something in the house, I hope?"

There was the sound of a little snort.

"As though I should ever allow meself to be out

of food, Mr. Chertsey sir ! If you can give me twenty minutes, I'll promise to have a real tasty morsel ready for you."

The man in the bath shouted.

" Splendid ! But not too much of the morsel, Mrs. Chandler ! "

" Very good, sir." Mrs. Chandler smiled as she went her way ; Gilbert Chertsey had always been a favourite of hers, in spite of " all them papers that was always littered about."

Twenty minutes later, Chertsey sat at his ease. A wood fire blazed cheerily on the open hearth ; the small, round dining-table glittered and glistened with fine linen and well-polished cut-glass ; a pint of good claret was on tap, and from beneath the shining cover there came a most appetising odour.

Lifting the cover, he found that the worthy Mrs. Chandler had surpassed herself ; a mixed grill of the most tempting variety was before him. A real nobleman of a chop was flanked on either side by a succulent, sizzling kidney, whilst round and about, as it were, nestled what Chertsey himself had many times called the trimmings—a small piece of steak, done to a turn, a fierce fellow of a sausage with a burst waistcoat, a curly rasher of bacon and, giving the whole picture a touch of colour, two bright-hued tomatoes, also succulent and ditto sizzling.

Chertsey did justice to this kingly dish, and when Mrs. Chandler unexpectedly appeared with a jam

omelette, he made no more to do than to catch her round the waist.

"Mrs. Chandler, you're one of the greatest women that ever lived!" he declared.

His landlady beamed.

"I wanted to make quite sure that you had plenty, sir; Chandler will be bringing up the coffee in five minutes."

The omelette was a worthy successor to the mixed grill; the coffee was Mrs. Chandler's best, and Mrs. Chandler could make coffee—and the cigar he had just lit rounded off everything that had gone before. Chertsey had achieved, for a brief while, a state of beatification.

One of the mockeries of life is that one's mood changes so quickly. Especially is this true with a man gifted with any imagination. Now that his body was fed, Chertsey found himself thinking of that welter of melodrama from which he had so recently emerged.

Was he going on with it? Was he going to be fool enough to exchange a life of comfortable ease for one of shattering shocks and very real danger?

A small voice said: "Don't be an ass!" But he shifted in his chair as the words passed through his mind.

Then he sprang up, so quickly that the ash from his cigar spilled on the red Turkey carpet.

Good God! He had his plot! . . . Real life had given him what his imagination had sought in vain for so long!

Eagerly he went to a drawer of the big desk standing in the recess of the window that overlooked the street, and pulled out a handful of large-sized writing paper.

The more he thought about it, the better it became. There were at least ten thousand words of ripping narrative in what had happened to him since leaving "The House of a Thousand Chances" in the rue Napoleon, and if he couldn't build on to that start, he was a bad craftsman.

Why, the people he had met already in that bizarre adventure were better characters than his imagination could have conjured up—and the situations were really wonderful! That man Lade . . . the curious ring he wore . . . the—that Thing in the wardrobe . . . and The Girl. . . .

Whilst his pen hovered over the paper for a smashing, opening sentence, his features became taut. There was a picture facing him, and his eyes must have been playing him false, for, instead of Millais' Portrait of a Child, what looked out at him from the frame was the magnetic face of the Mystery-Girl.

So strong was the illusion that he got up and walked across the room. But even as he verified how he had been deceived, he fancied that the girl's image had merely receded. . . . She was still watching him.

He clenched his teeth. A word—an ugly word—framed itself in his mind.

It was—coward!

He hadn't realised it before, lapped in the comfort of that room, but he had been in danger of going back on his word. It had been a preposterous pledge, no doubt—but still, he had given it. He had promised the girl to carry on.

A new wave of resolution whipped him as he recalled the look in the girl's face. She had regarded him as a poorish sort of adventurer, without a doubt, but since chance had thrust him into the position, she had made her appeal out of what had seemed sheer desperation.

That talk about Europe being threatened with chaos, and the hint that Great Britain was in peril, might be so much clotted nonsense—the hysterical outpouring of an over-wrought mind—but—

Yet now that he came to think about it, she had shown no hysteria whatever ; from first to last she had proved herself to be one of the coolest and most level-headed persons he had ever met.

That made it worse ; if by any conceivable chance she was right, then he had a double obligation.

As he flung the end of his cigar away, he was honest with himself : he wanted to see the girl again—and, when he saw her, he wanted to be able to look her straight in the eyes.

A quarter of an hour later, he was prepared to start. He had changed into a very old suit of tweeds—since he was supposed to be a ruined man, he might as well dress the part—and then rang the bell.

"I find I have to go away again, Mrs. Chandler. Please keep any letters that may come. I have a little business to attend to, and I shall be back as soon as possible."

Mrs. Chandler was always being surprised in the ways of her young men. With that nice fire, and a good dinner inside him, one would have thought that Mr. Chertsey would have been content where he was—and if he wanted something to occupy his mind, he could have done a bit of his writing.

But Mrs. Chandler knew her place.

"Staying with friends, Mr. Chertsey?" she asked, politely.

"Er—yes, of a sort," was the reply, as he got into his oldest overcoat and picked up the small handbag.

Chertsey did not like the look of the patrolling figure: possibly the murder had been discovered, and the house was being watched.

With some difficulty he found the noisome alley, climbed the wall, and dropped into the neglected garden of 712, Guildford Street.

The thought of what he had left in the room above sent a cold shiver passing through him.

Then calling upon his resolution, he started to mount the iron staircase that stretched gaunt and spectral-like in the wan light of the moon.

Hesitating for a moment, to see if he could catch any sound, he pushed open the bathroom window and passed inside.

Still he could not hear a sound. The flat seemed as deserted as when he left it.

He examined the two rooms, but nothing appeared disturbed.

The dead man! He did not like the idea of sleeping with that ghastly presence in the room.

Cautiously he opened the wardrobe door.

He stood stupefied.

The corpse was gone!

THIS room in the very heart of Mayfair, London Society's most fashionable quarter, was half in shadow.

Still, there was sufficient light to disclose its rare charm, an elegant standard-lamp of antique silver diffusing a soft glow through its parchment-coloured vellum shade.

The room was L-shaped, long, with a deep recess to the right at the far end. The walls were covered with a rich, old-gold paper, which formed an artistic background to the Gobelin blue carpet and heavy velvet curtains of the same tone.

Several rare pieces of Chippendale stood about ; and in the recess where the man was writing, a magnificent bookcase rose almost to the ceiling, entirely covering the three walls.

A room, it seemed, for quiet reflection—the room of a student and of a lover of the beautiful.

Yet the light which fell from the small lamp on the writing-table showed a face malignantly distorted.

"The cursed fools!" The words fell from his lips in three separate spasms of anger.

Sir Luke Benisty was angry because some subordinates had blundered with one of his plans.

Although this was a sufficiently rare occurrence, he objected fiercely to any of his schemes miscarrying.

Signing his name at the bottom of the letter he had just written, he rose.

Sir Luke Benisty was a striking personality. Over six feet in height, the grace of his slim figure and the aristocratic cast of his features, singled him out. He was said to be the best dressed man within a mile of St. James's Street, and he certainly carried his clothes with marked distinction.

He was clean-shaven except for a small, immaculate, iron-grey moustache. It was not until one had been in his presence for some time that the secret of the perpetual sneer he wore was explained by the drooping of the mouth. But the expression of habitual contempt had now been wiped away by the rage which possessed him.

He was interrupted in his pacing of the floor by a faint click. Turning, he saw a section of the book-case moving inwards. From the aperture thus made stepped a man.

It was Sylvester Lade.

Benisty had swung round quickly, although the noise made was hardly audible: the cabinet-maker who had done this job was a craftsman. His face became more composed when he recognised his visitor.

"I should have given you the signal, Benisty," the caller said in a tone of apology, "but I was in a hurry." While the other man looked at him curiously, he went on: "I've just seen your man."

"Chertsey?" The word was snapped.

"Yes."

"Where?"

Lade gave a ghost of a smile.

"In my tea-rooms off Jermyn Street. By the way," he broke off quickly, "he was keeping bad company."

Sir Luke Benisty raised his eyebrows. The act was a question in itself.

"He was with the girl Trentham. Don't ask me why, because I don't know. It was a damn risky thing for Thibau to do, it seems to me, sending over a man about whom he knows nothing." The bell-like voice had lost something of its silvery quality through the force of the speaker's feelings.

Sir Luke Benisty raised a slim, carefully-tended hand to his moustache.

"Thibau takes the responsibility," he said, in a note of finality. "I have never discovered the Frenchman to be wrong in his estimate of human character."

The other persisted.

"But what do you intend to do with him?"

"I shall find a use for Mr. Chertsey," was the response; and with that, the worst man in London, who not only knew the speaker, but feared him, had to be content.

"Where is Chertsey now?" Benisty's manner was anxious.

"I almost forgot to tell you that the police raided the tea-rooms to-night. No, they didn't grab friend Chertsey—I saw to that. As a matter of fact, they

didn't grab anyone. I'm rather at a loss to know what it means—except that the girl Trentham was sitting with Chertsey at the time." His look at the other was understood.

"That young lady is certainly becoming rather troublesome; I shall have to see about it," commented Benisty. "But Chertsey—where is he?"

"He left me with the intention, I understood, of returning to 712, Guildford Street."

"He said that?"

"He made a particular point of saying it."

A pause followed.

"Those fools blundered the job with Simpson!" was Sir Luke Benisty's next startling sentence. "If Chertsey found Simpson's dead body in the flat, the probability is, I suppose, that he would have informed the police."

Sylvester Lade gave a short laugh.

"I don't think friend Chertsey will be bothering the police for a while," he rejoined: "there was a rough and tumble at the tea-rooms to-night and Chertsey knocked out a detective-sergeant in a very workmanlike fashion."

Sir Luke Benisty shrugged his shoulders as though relieving them of a burden.

"Sometimes," he remarked, "I really think that I may be developing nerves; Simpson's body is now—elsewhere—and there," lightly dusting his hands, "we will leave it."

Three rings, soft but vibrant, sounded. They came from the direction of the recess.

"That's Snell," announced Benisty.

The speaker walked to the wall facing him and pressed an electric button.

The next moment the aperture in the bookcase glided open to admit another caller.

This man looked as though he had been born out of his age. He had the manners and something of the dress of an eighteenth century fop. His overcoat was waisted and extravagantly skirted. An immense black stock afforded a striking contrast to a large, heavy face that hadn't a vestige of colour.

Barrington Snell was a well-known, not to say notorious figure in the life of the Metropolis. He was a man whom all disliked and many feared. From an actor he had become a writer of scandalous paragraphs for disreputable papers. The mystery was that at least two Clubs allowed him to remain a member; and at twelve o'clock each morning his startlingly pallid face, with the dull, fish-like eyes, and the loose, flaccid mouth, could be seen in the bow window of a Piccadilly Club, looking out upon the world. Many stories were told of Barrington Snell—and the more extravagant and incredible these were, the greater probability had they of being true. It was only in a great Capital that such a man could have lived; and it was in the multiple wickednesses of the hidden parts of London that he exercised his dubious callings of blackmailer and loathsome parasite.

Although he had left the stage, Barrington Snell retained his actor's voice.

"Good evening, Sir Luke, and you, Sylvester," he said, in rolling tones. Strolling to a huge antique silver bowl containing chrysanthemums of beautiful autumn tints, he selected a bloom and placed it in his button-hole.

"What's your news, Snell?" asked Benisty, peremptorily. He used this man, but Snell's presence was always physically offensive.

"The information I have been able to gather to-night," replied Barrington Snell, "is to the effect that our friend from across the water is to be expected quite soon—on Wednesday, in fact. He is travelling incognito as 'Mr. James Forbes,' a buyer of woollen goods. The ship is the *Morengaria*."

Sylvester Lade broke in.

"Are you going to deal with this American here?" he asked Sir Luke Benisty.

"No—Paris!" snapped the other.

A N hour after Sir Luke Benisty had said the words, two men settled into their places at Rimini's. The table had been reserved, which accounted for it not being already occupied.

As the *maitre d'hôtel* walked away with an appreciative smile for the dishes chosen, the Hon. William Summers ("Billsum" to his intimates) turned to his companion.

"We can talk here," he said; "that is why I telephoned to Pauli to keep this particular table. Well, you dear but eccentric ass, what is your latest escapade?"

The man addressed, smiled. He was about thirty years of age, having that clean-cut, slightly ironic, determined appearance of the best type of young American. The challenge of the somewhat penetrating grey eyes was relieved by the whimsical shape of the mouth.

"You're very disrespectful," he replied.

That rising young politician, William Summers, resorted to slang.

"Come off it, Nap!" he urged; "spill the beans!"

The young man who rejoiced (and suffered) under the curious cognomen of Napoleon Miles, made an apologetic laugh.

"Under the name of 'Paul Lorenzo,' I am engaged to sing a few songs every night to my own guitar accompaniment," he replied; "you should come and hear me."

The son of the Earl of Darthaven forgot his recent worries and burst into a laugh that drew attention to the corner-table in the balcony.

"My sainted aunt, Nap, what's the idea? Where do you do this troubadour stunt?"

"At the Café of the Rosy Dawn," gravely replied the other; "it is a good engagement; they are paying me thirty pounds a week. If I do well, it may lead to a music-hall engagement." The speaker paused. "What the hell are you laughing at?" he inquired, politely.

Billsum went off into a fresh roar.

"Why 'Paul Lorenzo'?" he managed to gasp.

"Why not?" came the imperturbable response.

"And why not the saxophone?" persisted Summers.

"It's an ill wind that blows the saxophone," retorted Miles; "that's not mine—it's too good for me—I read it somewhere."

"I thought I knew a considerable bit about you, Nap," now said Summers, "but I'll be hanged if you haven't given me a fresh shock. I wasn't aware that you played the guitar."

"I do," remarked Napoleon Miles, modestly; "and I also sing—quite nicely. Come and hear me to-night."

"All right, I will," replied Summers, and then went off into a third fit of laughter.

The situation was preposterously ludicrous. The man sitting next to him was the possessor of five million dollars at least, and yet he was hiring himself out as a sort of twentieth century troubadour!

"What made you do it?" he now inquired.

"Got fed up with things at home. Thought I'd like to see Europe again before I die; decided with the high cost of living and all that sort of thing, that I had to pay my hotel bill somehow; met a man in Wash—I mean New York—who told me how—and here I am."

"You're stark, raving mad!" retorted Billsum, coldly; "feed your face!" for by this time the first course had arrived.

The Hon. William Summers continued to chuckle as he ate. In spite of his promising rise in politics, he had a well-developed sense of humour—years after he went down from Oxford, that dignified seat of learning told stories illustrative of this—but the good-looking, young American millionaire, with whom he had struck up a warm friendship three years before, when on a visit to Washington as an assistant private secretary to the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Frankland Fordyce, was the greatest practical joker he had ever met. A fellow with the equivalent of a million English pounds, strumming a guitar in a club that was nightly filled with a jazz-mad crowd! It was beyond him.

"Never mind my insignificant self," said Napoleon

Miles, pouring himself out a glass of wine ; " what about you, Bill—you look worried to me ? "

" I am worried," he confessed, in a low tone, after looking round ; " we are all worried—the Government, I mean. I can talk to you, Nap, because I know you can be absolutely trusted, and because, being an American, you are outside of this hurly-burly that is going on."

" Hurly-burly ? " Summers was not looking at Miles, or he would have noticed that the other's expression had changed. The eyes were still penetrating, but the whimsicality had gone from his mouth.

The Hon. William Summers laid down his knife and fork and leaned across the table. His voice, when he resumed speaking, was anxious.

" There's a devil's brew being mixed in Europe," he said ; " and England, as usual, will be dragged into it. I'm not sure," he went on, " that we're not already in it—and up to our neck, too ! You understand, old man, that I'm going outside my province, and that I'm exceeding my duty in talking to anyone in this strain, but you're an American and—"

" When the time comes, Bill," said Miles, with so much gravity that the Foreign Office official stared wonderingly, " you will find that America wil recognise that the two nations are composed o men who are brothers. One of my uncles is a Washington—that's why I know," he added, rather confusedly.

"Thank God for that!" replied Summers, fervently; "the future peace of the world depends on a union between the two great English-speaking nations. They talk about the League of Nations," an infinite contempt had come into his voice, "but what does it all amount to? So much newspaper dope! We have ex-ministers of the Crown broadcasting their opinion that a new era of peace on earth and goodwill towards nations is coming, when—my God! if everyone in this country only knew the truth!" Summers broke off to stare.

"Don't think me melodramatic, Nap," he said, "but if I had sufficient moral courage, I should shoot that man down there on sight. And I should be a far better patriot for doing it."

The American followed his gaze.

"You surely don't mean that fellow who looks like the whole of Debrett rolled into one?" he asked. He was looking at a tall, noticeably-distinguished man of fifty-five, who moved across the crowded lower floor of the restaurant with effortless grace.

"I do!" was the blunt reply. "That man is the blackest traitor that the mind can conjure up. His name is Sir Luke Benisty, and he is an Englishman. As a matter of fact, he used to be attached to the Foreign Office himself, being employed as a King's Messenger. There was some scandal—I don't exactly know what, because everyone is so deucedly reticent about it—but, anyway, Benisty left the Service. The story he told was that he resigned, but the truth was that he was hoofed out."

"Now the curious thing is this: when he was a King's Messenger, he was known to be a comparatively poor man, but during the last three years he must have made money at an astounding rate—how, no one seems to know—but he lives in one of the best houses in London, a sumptuous place in Berkeley Square, and cuts any amount of a dash.

"A great many people, my own Chief amongst them, are practically certain that he is a dead wrong 'un, but you know what we British are—we always give a fellow like that no end of rope—and, beyond being under suspicion, this precious swine is allowed to carry on pretty well as he likes."

"What's his particular game?" asked Miles.

"It seems far fetched," was the grave answer, "but my own opinion is that he makes his money through selling national secrets."

His companion softly whistled.

"But how does he get the information? You say he is out of the Service now."

Summers savagely cracked a walnut between first finger and thumb.

"I wish to God I knew!" he said; "one day I intend to know, and then——" The sentence was not completed, but a second walnut was cracked with such force that the politician might have harboured a personal grudge against it.

There was silence for a few moments. During this time, the American wore almost as thoughtful an expression as his friend.

"You make me rather interested in the fellow,"

he confessed ; " does this Sir Luke Benisty take any part in the night life of the Town ? Because if he does, and he wanders into the Café of the Rosy Dawn whilst I'm doing my Blondel act, I'll keep my eyes skinned."

The words were uttered jocularly enough, but they had an underlying gravity.

" It's funny you should say that, Nap," rejoined Summers, " but only this morning a newspaper man I know, vouchsafed the information that one of this swine Benisty's pet cronies is Sylvester Lade."

" Sylvester Lade ? Why, that's the fellow I'm under contract with. Isn't he the Big Noise of the London Night Clubs ? "

Summers smiled—rather grimly.

" He's something more than that," he supplied ; " Sylvester Lade has the reputation of being the vilest thing in human form that even London can produce at the present time. He's run very close by another skunk called Barrington Snell, but if half the stories I have heard are true, Lade can give the other fifty yards start in the hundred and still beat him easily. Lade is a kind of human fiend : there is no form of vice which he cannot supply, providing the devotee has the necessary cash. He runs opium joints in the East-end, and unmentionable dens in the West-end. To the world, of course, he is the proprietor of several *bona fide* night clubs ; and it is in this connection that you will meet him."

" You seem to have an interesting lot of guys amongst your acquaintances, Bill," commented the

American ; " tell me, old lad, how shall I know this Lade person when I see him ? "

Summers looked his questioner straight in the face.

" You won't be able to mistake him," he said ; " Sylvester Lade has the face of a saint and the eyes of a devil."

" And you say this guy is an associate of Sir Luke Benisty ? "

" I am told so by a man who generally knows what he is talking about."

Napoleon Miles looked at his watch.

" I must be pushing off," he announced ; " thanks for a very interesting hour, Bill, my boy. I'll store away all that you've told me, and if ever I get the chance to do the dirty on either of the gentlemen in question, trust little Napoleon to be on the job ! "

The smile with which the American had uttered this sentiment quickly vanished as his eye caught someone in the brilliant, shifting crowd below.

" Now *I'll* be sensational ! " he declared ; " there walks the most beautiful creature I have ever seen ! Bill, who is that wonderful girl ? "

Forgetting his usual impeccable manners, he pointed below.

The Hon. William Summers looked as directed.

" Her name is Ann Trentham," he replied. " Her father was a King's Messenger—but he shot himself."

His tone did not encourage even Napoleon Miles to pursue the subject.

CHAPTER VIII

CHERTSEY HAS A CALLER

CHERTSEY had not spent a restful night. This sleight-of-hand business with the corpse was inconducive to untroubled sleep.

That dead man, although vanished, held his attention. Who had come to snatch the body away? And where had they taken it?

One fact emerged fairly clearly: that was that he had not been intended to see the handiwork of the poisoner!

It was inevitable that his thoughts should return to the girl. But for her, he would have dismissed the whole affair, apart from utilising the facts as fiction material.

She fascinated him. There was a charm and a tang about her which were irresistible. Even if it meant his death, he knew that he could not abandon his connection with this business until he had solved the mystery which surrounded this girl. When that was done, he would tell the Unknown he loved her—ask her——

He smiled ruefully in the darkness. Only a modern d'Artagnan could hope to claim such a vital creature in marriage. What chance would he possibly have? She would look at him in polite pity,

and shake her small, glorious head. That would be the end of his ridiculous dream.

Would it? Not if he could help it! Something was stirring within him—something which he had not experienced before. Up to the time of being accosted by that stealthy duo, Lefarge and Thibau, at the *Café de la Paix*, when sitting at the corner table that overlooked the *Boulevard des Capucines*, life for him had run along very easy lines. The jars had been few and the cushions many. Most of the things Gilbert Chertsey had desired he had been able to obtain, and those which proved elusive, he did not bother a great deal about. Existence, in the main, had been a matter of drifting down a pleasant stream.

Now he had been bumped with a vengeance! The shock had been literally staggering. He wondered himself how he had rallied until he sought for the reason. This found, there in the darkness, he resolved that, although this girl of mystery was bound to shake her head, he would—one day—ask her to be his wife! Heaven knew how he was to sustain the *rôle*—but she was essential to him; so he must hazard his chance. Win or lose, Life could never be the same for him again. The very fact of meeting her had been a sufficiently thrilling experience, which could never be forgotten. He had tasted of a joy which left him dazed and breathless: henceforth, he would be like a slave to an intoxicating drug.

What could be the mystery of this girl? Although

he did not believe a word the man with the hooded eyes had said, yet it certainly was a curious fact that the police-raid should have coincided with her visit to that underground den. And why had she gone there in the first place ?

He considered now his own position. His action in trying to save the girl from arrest had placed him in a situation of some danger. Scotland Yard, from what he had heard and read, was not partial to having its officers pelted on the jaw, no matter how unpleasant were the faces which the same officers possessed. From now on, no doubt, he would be under suspicion, if not actual surveillance, for there were two ugly facts recorded against him. One, being found on raided premises, and, two, offering violent resistance to police-officers in the execution of their duty.

The old Gilbert Chertsey would possibly have felt a cold wave pass down his spine at the very thought ; the new experienced a sense of something like exaltation. Ridiculous, no doubt, but hadn't he got himself into this trough of trouble through service to the lady whose liegeman he had become ?

The reflection was satisfying, for he fell into another fit of slumber which lasted until eight o'clock.

With the murky streaks of light coming in through the window over the neighbouring house-tops, Chertsey sprang out of bed.

A cold tub gave him the feeling that he was ready for anything which might crop up. In fact, the change which had taken place in his mental

processes now inspired in him a definite longing for action of some sort.

Passing through the hall into the sitting-room, he noticed that a morning newspaper had been pushed through the door. Kindly thought ! He showed his appreciation by picking it up, and perusing it from front page to last, in front of the gas-fire in the sitting-room.

He had mastered the news sensation of the day, and had smiled as he compared its anæmic qualities with his own adventure the night before, when there was a ring and a rumbling sound.

Chertsey wondered what new development this might be, until he saw an array of dishes arrive on the service lift.

Breakfast !

That, certainly, was a cheering thought. The idea did flash across his mind momentarily that the same fate might have been prepared for him as for his predecessor, but a rapidly increasing sense of hunger banished this melancholy reflection.

The unseen power in the kitchen had not spared her labours : Chertsey, when he had set the dishes out, found porridge, bacon and eggs, toast and marmalade, awaiting his attention. The coffee was piping hot, and, with the rest of the viands, smelt delicious.

Three quarters of an hour later, with the tobacco in his pipe burning evenly, Chertsey wondered what was going to happen next. He would have liked to ask that obliging hall-porter a series of searching

questions, but did not consider the procedure discreet.

But what was he to do? Was he expected to stay in until someone called?

He was not given much more time to speculate, as a few moments later the flat door-bell rang.

With that quickened sense of excitement which had now become so familiar, he went into the hall.

Outside the door a tall, distinguished-looking man, of late middle age, stood smiling.

"Good morning, Mr. Chertsey!"

The novelist replied in kind.

"So charming of you to look me up—won't you come in?"

The words had the effect of relieving the other man's face of much of its geniality, but the caller immediately accepted the invitation.

Chertsey maintained his attitude of casual banter.

"You must excuse the smallness of my present quarters," he remarked; "the fact is, this flat was taken for me. I only moved in last night."

"May I ask at what time, Mr. Chertsey?"

"Oh, late-ish," almost yawned the novelist.

The visitor seemed about to ask some more questions, but restrained himself, and sat down.

"To be serious, Mr. Chertsey——" he started.

"Certainly! In the first place, may I open the ball by inquiring to whom I have the pleasure of speaking?"

The caller took out a gold cigarette-case and passed it to the speaker.

"My name is Sir Luke Benisty," he said; "and if you will be patient with me, Mr. Chertsey, I shall be pleased to explain much that no doubt to your mind requires explanation."

Although the words caused the listener's nerves to tingle, Chertsey, made confident by that newly-acquired sense of resolution, continued to play his cards with a certain amount of finesse.

"Well—I don't mind confessing that the situation, as it stands at present, seems more than a bit rummy," he said. "If I hadn't been cleaned out in Paris, I don't know that I should have taken up the proposition—especially as it came from two strangers."

The caller smiled conciliatorily.

"Those two men were my agents, Mr. Chertsey, and after you have heard my explanation, I think you will agree that they acted only wisely in showing the circumspection which they did." He paused, and the conviction to which Chertsey came was that although this man conceivably was a liar, yet, with his perfect manners and charming *bonhomie*, he was an artist at the job.

"No doubt they showed admirable judgment, Sir Luke," replied Chertsey; "but will you excuse me if I say that I am anxious to know what it all means. The ten thousand francs which the worthy Thibau—or was it the estimable Lefarge?—I really forgot—paid me was very welcome, but I understood there

were other benefits accruing if——” he tried to make his pause sound significant—“ I exercised tact and discretion.”

The caller’s frown softened. Some trace of his former geniality returned.

“ Thibau—it must have been Thibau—told you that ! ”

“ He certainly did,” said Chertsey, warming to his subject ; “ and very welcome it was to hear it, Sir Luke. I don’t mind admitting that when your two agents spoke to me at the Café de la Paix, I was feeling rather desperate.”

Sir Luke Benisty inclined his head.

“ These periods of misfortune have come to all of us,” he said, sympathetically. “ You are a novelist, I believe, Mr. Chertsey ? ” he continued.

Gilbert Chertsey’s imagination was now in full flood. At the risk of overdoing it, he persisted in his banter.

“ A novelist ! Paugh ! It sounds impressive, Sir Luke—but what does it really mean ? It meant when I was in Paris that I had exactly two francs in my pocket.”

“ I have heard it is only to a few writers that riches come,” commented the caller, in that same tone of sympathy.

He looked keenly at the younger man.

“ However,” he added, “ if you really prove to possess the necessary qualifications of tact and discretion, coupled, perhaps, with a certain amount of physical courage, your troubles may prove to be at an end. I am willing to help you.”

"That's awfully good of you, sir." Chertsey this time endeavoured to make his voice sound as sincere as possible.

Sir Luke Benisty carefully knocked the ash from his cigarette.

"What I am about to say, Mr. Chertsey, may startle you perhaps, but nevertheless I wish you to understand that I am perfectly serious. I am rich, and I have a hobby, or perhaps it would be more truthful to say, a vocation, which causes me to enlist from time to time the services of just such young men as yourself. Now, if you will continue to give me your attention, I will explain in more detail.

"Briefly, I am dissatisfied with the manner in which the police and the allied branches of order conduct their business. Their methods, in my view, are too lax. Consequently, at enormous expense to myself, I have effected an organisation of my own which, from time to time, and as I think fit, takes the law into its own hands and administers justice according to my own idea."

"That's mighty interesting, sir," commented the listener. Chertsey did the other this honour: he might be a liar, but certainly he was an ingenious one.

As Benisty kept silent, he ventured another remark: "But, surely, it's very risky?"

The caller raised a white, slim hand to caress the end of his immaculate moustache.

"Certainly, it's risky; that's what makes it so interesting. And, because of that fact, I am willing

to pay big salaries to the men whose services I engage. Let me tell you this, Mr. Chertsey: that the work I am doing is of the very highest importance to the nation, although the authorities with their official blindness could not be made to recognise the fact."

Chertsey affected an eagerness which was not wholly assumed.

"When can I start?" he asked.

Sir Luke Benisty smiled in what he might have supposed was an ingratiating manner. White teeth showed beneath that trim, iron-grey moustache.

"You confess you are interested, then?"

This time it was Chertsey who smiled.

"By Jove! yes!" he declared, and again his eagerness was not wholly assumed.

"There are some preliminaries to be undergone, Mr. Chertsey," now said the caller. "I mentioned just now that one of the qualifications necessary for you to possess in order to join my—shall we call it staff?—was a certain physical courage. Are you a brave man, Mr. Chertsey?"

The smile by this time struck the candidate as being wolfish. Not only was Sir Luke Benisty showing his teeth, but his eyes, beneath their lids, were giving off a decided gleam. Chertsey was repelled, but that newly arisen sense of manhood came to his rescue.

"I don't profess to be anything wonderful," he replied; "but, given the chance, I think I could stick most things as well as one here or there."

The smile deepened.

" You shall certainly have the opportunity,"
replied Sir Luke.

It must have been his imagination, but Chertsey
felt that the room had suddenly become cold.

CHAPTER IX

"THERE IS DANGER"

CHERTSEY stiffened at the tone. The man appeared to be mocking him.

"I am entirely at your service, Sir Luke," he said.

The face of the visitor resumed its mask of geniality.

"That is delightful, Mr. Chertsey. Very well; you shall do me the honour of paying a visit to my house in Berkeley Square to-night. I will send someone to bring you."

He turned to go.

Chertsey felt that the air was cleaner directly the door closed. Sir Luke Benisty was a plausible person, but, unless he was wrong in his guess, he was also a remarkably dangerous person. That tale he had told . . . it might have done for the plot of a sensational drama, but he had been strongly tempted to laugh in Benisty's face. The only part of it which rang true was the statement that Benisty went outside the law. He was fully prepared to believe that. But as for the rest——

That night he might learn more—something of the real truth perhaps; with this reflection he had to be content: there were not many hours to wait.

Yet the waiting was very much more trying than

he had imagined. He could not get Sir Luke Benisty's smile out of his mind: the man, for all his exquisite polish and perfect manners, when he bared his teeth in that mocking grin, was plain wolf.

After lunch he decided to go out. His appointment with Benisty was not until the evening, and it was a delightful day, crisp yet bright. Chertsey thought longingly of a sharp walk in the Park.

He had closed the flat-door when an unmistakable sound made him pause.

The telephone!

Who could be ringing up? He had better answer, he supposed. But he would have to be careful: it might be a pal of the dead man's. Which reminded him: one of the questions he proposed putting to Sir Luke Benisty at the first opportunity was in reference to the mysterious appearance and disappearance of that corpse.

But in the meantime, the 'phone-bell was ringing loud enough to rouse the whole house.

"Yes?" he snapped, and then: "*It's you!*"

The girl's voice at the other end disregarded the two last impassioned words.

"Who is that speaking?" she asked, coldly.

"Chertsey—CHERTSEY!" he roared.

"Yes," after a pause—"I recognise your voice now. But you will understand that I had to be certain."

"Of course! I understand that!" The man's voice was eager, clamant: the fact that the girl had rung up re-established the bond which he ha-

persuaded himself existed between them. "I say, I have some news for you," he continued, quickly.

"Are you sure you are alone?—that no one can hear you?" The words of caution sounded strained.

"Quite sure. But, look here, can't I see you again—now, I mean, this afternoon? I was just going out for a walk in the Park when you rang up."

There was another pause. Chertsey thought that they must have been disconnected, or that the girl had quietly rang off.

"Are you there?" he almost shouted.

"I was thinking," came the reply; "if you are careful, it might be all right. Look at your watch and tell me the time, please."

"It's twenty minutes past two," he replied.

"You are a minute fast. Now the probability is that you are being closely watched. If you find you are, on no account come; but if you decide, after leaving the flat, that you are not being followed, come to Lancaster Gate Tube Station. I will be waiting just inside the Park Gates on the other side of the road. Do not be there before a quarter past three—and, even if you think you are not being followed, come by a circuitous route. Change trains as many times as you can—use up the time that way." There was a click after the last word.

Chertsey remained by the instrument, softly caressing his chin. If any other woman he had ever known had rung off in that abrupt manner without saying good-bye, he would have exploded. But he admired the mystery-girl for her acumen.

Whether she was right or wrong—and the evidence so far in favour of her being right seemed overwhelming—she certainly left nothing to chance.

As Chertsey shut the flat-door behind him, he thrilled at a thought : in less than an hour he would be with this girl again. He would be able to look into her eyes, to watch her lips framing words. . . .

Had anyone else told him to hop from train to train in the eccentric manner of the next forty minutes, he would have calmly but thoroughly told them to go to the devil, but it was with the air of a schoolboy successfully practicing a prank that he emerged from the lift at Lancaster Gate Tube at fourteen minutes past three o'clock.

"Were you followed?" asked the girl, a few seconds later.

Chertsey retained the small gloved hand which she extended.

"I don't think so. I had a good look round when I left the flat, and I couldn't see anyone who appeared suspicious. And I seem to have got in and out of every Tube train in London since then. Please don't worry about that."

The girl did not reply. She led the way to a smart two-seater coupé car which stood by the kerb.

"We will drive through the Park," she said ; "we shall be less noticeable."

She handled the car with an expert's touch on the wheel. Beautifully dressed as usual, her profile fascinated Chertsey, sitting engrossed by her side.

"Tell me your news," she said, when they were comparatively clear of traffic.

She listened without interruption until Chertsey had come to an end.

Then :

"There is still time for you to leave this affair, Mr. Chertsey," she said.

He turned.

"Of course, I shall not leave ; apart from anything else, I want to see this fellow, Sir Luke Benisty, smiling on the other side of his face."

The car slowed down.

"There may possibly be considerable danger attached to your visit to-night," the girl replied. "Benisty is a dangerous man—I doubt if there is such another in the whole of the country—and," she lowered her voice instinctively, "you know something which you were not intended to know."

Chertsey nodded.

"I arrived at the flat before the proper time, I'm thinking ; something in their time-table must have miscarried. Still, it seems to me that if Benisty and his crowd wanted to polish me off, they would show a little more subtlety than inviting me to his house to be poisoned. That sort of thing went out with the Borgias."

"Yet the dead man you saw in the flat was poisoned, you say ? "

"I believe so. I understand very little about such things, but the poor devil's face was horrible,

and it was certainly my impression at the time that he must have been poisoned."

"Sir Luke Benisty has an Oriental strain in him," was the girl's comment. "I feel bound to warn you again, Mr. Chertsey, that your visit to his house to-night may be attended by considerable danger."

To cover his real feelings, he endeavoured to be flippant.

"If within forty-eight hours I do not make a characteristically dramatic reappearance, please inform Sir William Leverston, my publisher, that I died in the execution of my duty."

An answering smile did not appear on the girl's face, which remained very grave.

"It was because I was afraid that something serious might have happened that I rang you up," she said.

Chertsey could have hugged her for the solicitude. But he controlled his voice sufficiently to reply: "That was awfully kind of you."

This time he made no pause, but the girl must have read his mind.

"My name is Ann Trentham," she said.

Ann!

She did not look an Ann—and yet she did, he decided, after another glance at that clean-cut profile which was so provokingly near him.

"Thank you," he replied. A slight flush coloured her cheeks, but she made no other sign that she had heard.

Quickly he had a fear—not for himself but for her. It was a genuine spasm of dread.

"These men know you, Miss Trentham. They warned me against being seen with you. I must tell you that. At least, that underground café specialist, Sylvester Lade, did. What a beauty he is : like an archangel who's taken to cocaine."

"When did he say that?"

"Before I left the place last night."

"I haven't thanked you yet for saving me a great deal of indignity, Mr. Chertsey. If it had not been for you, the police might have worried me."

He looked straight into her eyes. The car had stopped near the Serpentine.

"May I say something?" he asked, and when she had briefly nodded, her eyes questioning: "I cannot imagine you doing anything which would cause the police to annoy you, Miss Trentham."

The reply was prompt—and somewhat startling. "I might—in certain circumstances."

He did not pursue the matter because he could see that she did not mean him to follow up her remark. But his conviction remained unaltered.

"I will add, however," Ann Trentham went on, "that I'm not what Sylvester Lade probably called me—a police-spy. Far from enlisting the aid of the police, I intend to follow this thing through on my own."

She was speaking her thoughts aloud, it seemed to Chertsey, rather than conversing with him; and, that being so, did he not venture further. Girl of

impenetrable mystery that she was, he yet knew her name. It was something, a great deal to him in his present mood.

" You would like to know what happens at Sir Luke Benisty's house to-night ? " he asked, after a short pause.

She fumbled with the gauntlet of her glove, showing the first sign of agitation.

" I would give a great deal to know," she replied, " but—"

" Yes ? " he encouraged.

" I still feel that I am asking you to undertake too much. No, wait, please," as he was about to interrupt, " last night, I know, I made a certain appeal to you. Being a man, you accepted my challenge—for challenge it was—but now I see quite clearly that I had no right to ask you to run such a risk. Mr. Chertsey, forget all that I have said. I will find out the truth—the information I am seeking—for myself."

" You'll do nothing of the kind ! " he rejoined, in a voice he scarcely recognised as his own : " for years now I've been living a supremely selfish and useless sort of life. You say big things hang on this business—"

" Tremendous things ! " The words were breathed tensely.

" Very well, then ! " said Chertsey ; " I, a useless idler, have been given a chance to prove that I can be something more than a mere scribbler of high-falutin' nonsense. I'm going to take it. Only,"

—he stopped—“ I want to feel that I shall be working with you.”

“ I will give you all the help I can.”

The simple words made him buoyant.

“ That gives me a personal interest. But I should have had that before in a way, although to nothing like the same extent. The four people I have so far met have certainly not been very attractive, and it will give me a great deal of pleasure to do them one in the eye. Especially friend Benisty. He smiled at me this morning in a manner which I particularly disliked. Of course, I did not believe a word of that yarn he pitched, but from his subsequent remarks I rather gather that he and his cronies are going to ascertain to-night if I am a fit and proper person to be admitted into the exclusive fellowship of The Black Heart.”

“ The Black Heart. . . .”

His companion had repeated the words in that low, tense voice.

“ Find out all you can about The Black Heart,” she now said. “ We mustn’t be seen together—remember, they have already warned you about that—but I shall find a way.”

“ Won’t you give me your address—your telephone number ? ” he asked. The thought of being a comrade to this girl sent the blood surging through his veins.

“ Can you remember ? You had better not have anything on you in case you are searched.”

“ My memory is the only reliable part of a notoriously weak intellect,” Chertsey assured her.

She gave him an address and a telephone number.
"Perhaps it will be better if you write," she advised ; "one can never tell when telephoning, and, unless I am very much mistaken, Benisty has his spies everywhere. And now," with a quick change of tone, "I had better drive you back part of the way."

Chertsey was set down in an unfrequented spot, and, acting on his instructions, he strode quickly away without looking back.

He felt he was leaving his heart behind him.

" **I**HAVE called to accompany you to Sir Luke Benisty's house."

Chertsey stared at the speaker. The two men connected with the exotically-named Society of The Black Heart he had already met were sufficiently arresting in their separate style, but this caller was the queerest fish of the lot to his thinking. The gross face of this mincing-voiced giant, with the remarkable manner of dressing, was sickeningly repulsive.

" My name is Barrington Snell," announced the caller ; " like you, Mr. Chertsey, I have written. Memoirs and things of that description mainly. Fleet Street has known me—knows me still. . . . Do I bore you ? " he inquired, languidly, fixing a monocle in his fishy right eye.

Chertsey came out of his temporary stupor.

" On the contrary, Mr. Snell ; you interest me tremendously. You are a friend of Sir Luke's ? "

" A personal friend," declared the other, with an emphasis which, for some reason he could not define, Chertsey found odious. " But, excuse me, we had better be going. Sir Luke is the soul of punctuality himself, and he cannot bear being kept waiting."

"Two minutes, and I shall be ready," replied the novelist. He was as good as his word.

His chief feeling upon alighting from the car outside the palatial mansion in the famous square, was one of suppressed excitement. He rather hoped something dramatic or startling would happen. The recital of it would give him an early opportunity of meeting Ann Trentham again.

A footman in a neat livery opened the door and, with the stoop-shouldered, gigantic Snell by his side, he passed into the house.

Snell seemed familiar with his surroundings. He led the way into a brilliantly-lit room, handsomely furnished in exquisite taste.

"Sir Luke will be here shortly, Mr. Chertsey. I am desolated to leave you, but I have to go. But first you will do me the honour, I trust, of joining me in a glass of wine? It is our host's express wish," he added.

"I shall be very pleased."

Chertsey spoke without reflection. He was not thinking about this man; his mind was concerned with the master or employer he served.

A footman brought two glasses of sherry on a silver salver.

"To our better acquaintance, Mr. Chertsey," toasted Barrington Snell.

Chertsey raised his glass, drained its contents, swayed unsteadily—and then crashed to the floor.

He returned to consciousness slowly. Darkness—

a gloom deep and impenetrable—surrounded him as he opened his eyes.

Not only was he unable to see, but he could not move. His hands were bound and his body was in a vice. He was naked to the waist.

"Gilbert Chertsey!" From out of the blackness, a voice called his name. He thought it belonged to Sir Luke Benisty.

"Yes," he replied. He tried—and almost succeeded—in keeping his furious rage out of this single word of answer.

His eyes were becoming more accustomed to the gloom now, and as he looked about him, he noticed two facts which caused a wave of apprehension to pass down his spine and threatened to unman him.

The first circumstance was that he was surrounded by a ring of hooded figures. These recalled instantly to his mind the horrific stories he had read as a boy of the Spanish Inquisition familiars. Through the slits in the hoods, the eyes of the watchers gleamed maliciously. . . .

That sinister ring of spectators was disturbing enough, but the second fact was far more unnerving.

Bound hand and foot, he had been placed in some sort of long, tight-fitting box—a coffin. . . .

"Gilbert Chertsey, you are now upon your trial," announced the voice which had spoken before.

Simultaneous with the word "trial," a bright light erupted, to shine full upon Chertsey's face. His eyes were dazzled.

"Are you willing to undergo the test necessary

before you can be admitted to the Fellowship of The Black Heart ? " continued the voice.

" I am." To whatever this amazing procedure might lead, he had to go on with it. Argument was futile, helpless as he was. And if these pantomimic gentlemen thought they could make him squeal, they were due to be mistaken.

Something else showed up out of the darkness now ; it was a phosphorescent human skull. This illuminated death's head had a set, mirthless, mocking grin.

" Are you willing, Gilbert Chertsey, to take the oath required of each and every candidate for the Fellowship of The Black Heart ? "

A rustling sound accompanied the question, and Chertsey realised with a fresh start of astonishment that one of the hooded figures had left the circle of watchers and was now bending over him. In his right hand the man held a long-bladed poinard.

" Gilbert Chertsey, you are now very near to death ! " the voice announced. " Should your courage fail you in this, the moment of your trial, the dagger which you see will be plunged instantly into your heart—for you will be deemed unworthy to become one of us."

Chertsey could distinctly hear the furious beating of his heart. This might be mummary, but it was so real as to be positively terrifying. It might be, of course, that Sir Luke Benisty, actuated by some mental perversion, had decided that this should be the way in which he was to die.

The thought caused him to make a slight movement. Instantly he felt a prick over his heart; the poinard had pierced his skin.

"I have already warned you!" The voice was now terrible.

"Let me take the oath!" he answered.

The suspense was bathing him in perspiration. He gritted his teeth, calling upon a fresh reserve of mental strength.

"Very well. You will repeat slowly after me the following words: I, Gilbert Chertsey, do hereby solemnly declare and promise that if I am elected to the Fellowship of The Black Heart, I will keep secret and hold inviolate to my dying day all information of any description whatever which is vouchsafed to me. Furthermore, I promise strict and unquestioning obedience to the Chief of the Order, Sir Luke Benisty."

What else was there for him to do but to repeat the words? If he refused, or even faltered, undoubtedly he would be killed. And then Ann Trentham would be left alone. . . . Time enough for him to debate the matter with his conscience when he was a free man again. Thus he rapidly reflected.

"Gilbert Chertsey, you have taken your solemn oath. By that sign of death," an arm pointed to the phosphorescent skull, "I warn you that the least sign of treachery will be met by your instant annihilation. You have already been witness to the fate of a man who played us the traitor. Your

predecessor in the flat at 712, Guildford Street was a member of The Black Heart. He developed treacherous tendencies, however, and we had to remove him. Let his miserable end be always a warning to you !

"And now," the voice continued, "in order that you may never forget your obligations to us, and so that wherever you may be, we shall know you for a member, you are forthwith to be branded with the symbol of the Fellowship."

His eyes swimming, Chertsey noticed there was a glowing brazier by the side of the speaker. He watched a hooded figure lift a red-hot rod from the flaming heart of the charcoal, saw this man draw near, felt a searing pain in his left shoulder—and then quietly swooned.

The man's face stared at him out of the morning newspaper. Chertsey allowed his coffee to grow cold whilst reading the startling announcement that accompanied the photograph.

"A sensational discovery was made early last evening by a farm labourer, named George Walsh, who lives near Dymchurch, Kent.

"Whilst walking from his work over the Romney Marshes, he stumbled in the darkness against a man's corpse.

"This was afterwards identified as being the body of Mr. C. R. J. Simpson, a junior official in the British Foreign Office.

" It was subsequently ascertained, as the result of enquiries, that Mr. Simpson had been in bad health of late, and had been granted a month's leave in consequence.

" From the fact that an empty phial of poison was discovered clutched in his right hand, it is surmised that this brilliant young Foreign Office official took his own life. Mr. Simpson had lately been under treatment for neurasthenia by a Harley Street specialist.

" An inquest will be held."

Chertsey had barely finished reading when the telephone bell rang.

" You understand you are to know nothing concerning the unfortunate gentleman whose sad fate is chronicled in the morning's newspapers," said a hard, cold voice, which he instantly recognised. Before he could reply, he heard Sir Luke Benisty ring off.

As he walked back to the breakfast table, Chertsey felt that slight wound in his left shoulder throb again. The previous night, after returning from Berkeley Square, he had looked in the glass to see an inflamed circular patch of skin. He had been really branded.

It did not require the slight stab of pain to make him register yet another vow: somehow or other, he would reverse the tables on this master mummer—and he would do so whilst respecting so far as was possible, the oath he had been forced to take.

In the meantime, breakfast had lost its savour : Sir Luke Benisty had been proved a person of his word.

The photograph printed in the *Morning Mail* was that of the man he had found dead not forty-eight hours before in the adjoining room.

CHAPTER XI AT THE CAFÉ OF THE ROSY DAWN

LIKE most other capitals, London has a special interest in the unusual. When some newspaper gossip printed the story that Paul Lorenzo, the "gay guitarist" from America, who was to appear nightly at the Café of the Rosy Dawn, was really a rich man in search of novel experiences, that section of midnight carousers who set the fashion for Mayfair, flocked to the well-known night club off Piccadilly Circus.

Sylvester Lade, the man who had made a fortune by supplying the unusual, smiled his characteristic welcome to them all. Immaculately dressed, charmingly mannered, those evil eyes discreetly hooded, he made the announcement that the gossip-writer's paragraph was substantially correct.

"No, dear people, I must absolutely refuse to tell you his real name!" he replied, suavely, to all inquirers; "you must be satisfied with Paul Lorenzo—surely that's attractive enough?"

This second night of the much-discussed entertainer's appearance saw the principal salon crowded. Everyone in the fashionable set wished to see Paul Lorenzo—the man, it was stated, who had more money than he knew what to do with, and yet

who amused himself by playing a guitar in a cabaret.

Paul Lorenzo proved to be a debonair, good-looking man of thirty. Quite apart from the very interesting stories that were being bandied about, his smile instantly won all hearts.

That, in spite of his supposed wealth, he was a talented performer on his particular instrument, was soon demonstrated: to his own accompaniment he also sang several songs in a pleasing baritone voice. The "turn" was an instantaneous success.

Amongst the visitors to the Café of the Rosy Dawn that night, was a girl whose striking beauty attracted many eyes. Men came to her table, flattering homage on their lips—but to one and all Ann Trentham expressed regret, but she was not dancing.

She was not in the mood for any form of merriment. Her thoughts were sufficient company, and they were grave. That afternoon she had rung up the flat at 712, Guildford Street, but after a long wait, Exchange had given her the ominous message: "No reply."

Had she done right in sending that man headlong into such a maelstrom? Young, successful—she had verified this fact from a leading bookseller—with much in life to hold him, he had gone at her instigation to what might well prove his death.

She knew these men ; whom else could know Sir Luke Benisty as well as she ? Was it not Benisty who had caused her father to lie in a suicide's grave ?

Hugh Trentham, D.S.O., had been a trusted King's Messenger in the years following the war. He gloried in the work, and honoured the trust which was placed in him. He was respected and admired by his superiors.

Then—how laboriously she had had to work to get the details—her small world had been shattered by a terrific scandal. Her father, sent on a secret mission to the Continent, with documents of the highest importance, had been found shot in a questionable gaming-house at Buda-Pesth. A revolver with one chamber discharged was lying by his side. Not only the State documents, but the large sum of money in English banknotes he had carried for his Country—were gone.

The affair was hushed up, of course ; practically every friend of her father's had said that some insoluble mystery was at the back of the disaster—but the sordid, unclean, unmistakable facts remained : a man who was believed to be the soul of honour, had failed, on the strongest circumstantial evidence, in his trust.

Like most girls of her class, Ann had not previously given a great deal of thought to religion, but a month after the tragedy, Destiny apparently appointed her to a task. An aged aunt of her father's died in Baltimore—and her fortune of 400,000 dollars

was left in its entirety to the girl who was prostrated with grief.

Instantly,* Ann, who had aged many years during these four weeks, saw herself selected as an instrument of Fate. She would devote this money which had so unexpectedly come to her, to one end—the tracking down of the man who had been the means of her father taking his life.

This task, which would have appalled by its immensity the ordinary girl, presented itself to her merely in the light of a long and difficult inquiry which might tax her patience to the uttermost. Beyond that she would not see: she allied her relentless purpose to the confidence of youth. At twenty-four, moreover, she had the worldly knowledge and experience of many women of thirty. Left motherless when quite a child, her father had made a pal of her; it was his pet joke to call her "Sonny" . . . In that scene of glare and glitter, the memory caused her to stare across the room with fixed, unseeing eyes.

Telling no one, using her native wits unceasingly, spending money lavishly, in order to gain the slightest clue, mixing with the queerest people, often at the gravest risk, undertaking long journeys, always alone, she had slowly and laboriously formed a theory. She knew almost to a certainty her father's enemy, but this knowledge was valueless without actual proof.

It was in pursuing this proof that she chanced upon the gigantic conspiracy against the peace of

Europe, which this same man—the arch-fiend, Sir Luke Benisty—was organising.

" You are alone, Miss Trentham ? "

She looked up to find the odious eyes of Sylvester Lade fixed malevolently upon her. In the search for the facts she required, she had become a frequent visitor to many night clubs, for amongst the knowledge she had gained was that this controller of cabarets was a close associate of Sir Luke Benisty.

" I do not care for ladies to come to my establishments unaccompanied, Miss Trentham," continued the sneering voice.

The words alone were an insult, and the girl flushed vividly.

" Consequently, I am afraid I must ask you to leave."

Ann stood up. She was conscious that everyone around her was staring. It was a public humiliation of the worst description.

" You are an abominable cad ! " was the reply she made.

Sylvester Lade, his face venomous, caught the girl by the shoulder.

Nap Miles found the scene very amusing, very stimulating and—after a while—very interesting.

That girl, sitting alone in the corner—surely he had seen her before ?

Then, quickly, he remembered : it was the girl whose remarkable beauty he had commented

upon when lunching two days before in Rimini's restaurant with Bill Summers. What was she doing here? Had she fallen captive to his manly beauty and wonderful personal charm as demonstrated in his newspaper photographs and the descriptive matter that had been written by the gossip paragraphists?

The smile faded from his face: the girl had risen as though she had been insulted. That quite remarkable swine, Sylvester Lade, was evidently bullying her.

A few seconds later, Miles was across the room. Before he could reach the spot, however, he saw Lade do an unpardonable thing, gripping the girl's white shoulder with what seemed brutal force.

Instantly the offending arm was knocked up.

"I think there must be some mistake," Miles said, coldly; "this lady is a friend of mine. She came here at my invitation to-night. I am profoundly sorry you should have been upset, Miss Trentham," addressing the girl.

He saw a look of gratitude flash into her face. Ann Trentham smiled.

"There has been a mistake, as you can see, Mr. Miles," she replied; "your performance was delightful, I enjoyed it tremendously—but I must go now."

He stepped between her and the crowd of staring spectators.

"I will see you home, Miss Trentham, if I may."

Someone caught his arm. It was the furious Lade.

" You can't leave the club," he stormed ; " you are due to play again in ten minutes."

" I'm not playing here again to-night," said the " gay guitarist," very distinctly, " so you had better make some other arrangement. I do not stand for my friends to be insulted." He offered the girl his arm and led her away.

" I know you must be wondering all sorts of things, and so I will give you the explanation now, Miss Trentham," remarked her escort, as he handed her into the taxi-cab a minute later.

" I saw you at Rimini's restaurant in the Strand the other day. I was lunching there with a friend of mine—Bill—I mean the Hon. William Summers, of the British Foreign Office—I'm an American myself."

" I—it was very rude of me—but I transgressed to the extent of asking Bill who you were. He told me your name. When I saw that rotter worrying you to-night, I felt that I knew you indirectly—and I had to take a hand in the business."

Ann Trentham held out her hand.

" I am very much indebted to you, Mr. Miles. The man Lade insulted me. I was quite alone—and I wanted a friend badly just then."

" You needn't worry about being friendless as long as I'm about, Miss Trentham," he told her with American directness. " Here's my card—if ever I

can be of service to you, kindly give me a ring. I shall be in London for a while yet—unless," he added reflectively, "something unexpected crops up."

As he turned away, Napoleon Miles felt there was more than one reason why he should like to see this girl again.

He did not return to the Café of the Rosy Dawn. Sylvester Lade had to be taught a lesson, he decided; and, in any case, he was bored. What was more, he had far more important things to think about—a coded cablegram received that afternoon from Washington was one of them. Even to Napoleon Miles' volatile and somewhat eccentric temperament, playing the guitar to a set of wine-flushed, midnight revellers, seemed an incongruous proceeding whilst that cablegram was waiting for his further consideration in the locked drawer at his flat.

In the Café of the Rosy Dawn, the incident which had caused so much attention at the time was forgotten. Dancing continued; the flow of wine increased as the hours sped; laughter became a trifle more strident, speech rather more blurred—but that was all: everyone was happy, or pretended to be, and those who could never achieve real happiness again, almost succeeded in forgetting.

Mingling with his patrons, Sylvester Lade looked as unruffled as ever. He smiled, nodded flattered.

Yet a girl paying her first visit to the Night Club, and seeing him for the first time, whispered to her escort : " That man makes me shudder ! "

The speaker was something of a psychologist.

Black Hell ruled in Sylvester Lade's heart that night.

THAT trans-Atlantic greyhound, the *Moren-garia*, was twenty-four hours distant from Southampton, when the passenger, who had registered as Mr. James Forbes, and who in the few conversations he had held with his fellow travellers on the way from New York had let it fall that he was going to England to buy woollen goods, received a wireless message.

Anyone looking over the shoulder of Mr. James Forbes at the moment the latter was reading his message, might have smiled :

Cissie Sends Her Best Love. Papa Happy.

To such a person it would have seemed a wicked waste of money to have flashed those seemingly fatuous words through the ether. But such an onlooker could not have read in the message what caused Mr. James Forbes to bite his lower lip, whilst the rest of his face was expressionless.

Five minutes later—that is, after he had allowed sufficient time to stultify the curiosity of any possible prying person—the self-confessed buyer of woollen goods walked slowly to his cabin.

Once inside, and having carefully locked the door

behind him, his manner changed to such an extent that he might have become within the space of a single minute, an entirely different person from the stolid, somewhat *gauche* passenger which the general community on the *Morengaria* had considered him to be.

With every sign of eagerness, he seated himself in a chair facing the bed, and drew from his breast pocket a small book. It was a curious volume, for Mr. Forbes' manner of opening it was to insert a tiny key hanging from his watch-chain, in the equally tiny lock that held the two stiff covers together.

The buyer of woollen goods commenced to turn the pages of his little book very rapidly. In the meantime, the wireless message was laid out on the bed. Mr. Forbes' procedure was to look at one word of the message, and then proceed—or so it seemed—to see what his little book had to say about this particular word.

In twenty minutes, he achieved a surprising solution. As the result of the information received from the locked book he wrote several words beneath those of the original message. These, in their entirety, ran :

Plans changed. Instead of London, proceed direct to Paris, stay Hotel Charles VII. LOGAN.

"Well, I'm damned!" said Mr. Forbes. His astonishment did not lead him to be less cautious than before, however, for, striking a match, he burned

the paper on which he had decoded the words, and even then scattered the ash through his fingers. That done, he re-locked his book of mystery and placed it in his breast pocket.

The Captain of an ocean-going liner of the class of the *Morengaria*, is a somewhat difficult personage to be approached by an ordinary passenger, unless the latter's business is both important and urgent. Mr. James Forbes' business must have come under both categories, for within ten minutes of leaving his cabin, he was alone with the Captain in a private room—and his host's manner was attentive.

"I have just had a wireless from the President, Morrison; I am to go to Paris instead of proceeding to London. What do you suggest?"

Arthur Morrison, Captain of the *Morengaria*, was quick in his reply. "Nothing can be done until we reach Southampton, Mr. Rinehart. We are due in port in twenty-four hours—say three o'clock to-morrow afternoon. There is a boat leaves Southampton at 11.45 the same night, arriving at Havre at seven o'clock the next morning. What I suggest is, that you leave the arrangements to me. You can stay in my own quarters when we reach Southampton, until it is time for you to catch the Havre boat. You need not worry about your trunks."

"Perhaps it would be as well to wireless for a promenade deck cabin," suggested the man who had two names.

"Certainly. I will have that attended to immediately."

"I'm awfully obliged to you, Captain." The face which was remarkable for its immobility, slipped into a companionable smile: Mr. James Forbes *alias* Mr. Washburn Rinehart, could be human when he tried, it seemed.

The Captain accepted the proffered hand almost deferentially.

"I am merely doing my duty, sir," he replied; "so long as you are aboard my ship, I hold myself responsible not only for your safety, but for your personal comfort."

Once out of the Captain's room, the man addressed became the matter-of-fact prospective buyer of Yorkshire products. The world bounded by the steel walls of the *Morengaria* would have marvelled had it known the truth: the truth being that, physically disguised, just sufficiently to deceive the average person, the name of Mr. James Forbes concealed the identity of the man who, next to the President himself, wielded most power in that most powerful nation, the United States of America.

At rare intervals, Washburn Rinehart smiled at the fact that each morning a trusted valet—who ostensibly had no relation with him—arrived at the cabin to change the contour of his face. Dwight had the trick of make-up. It savoured of melodrama, this business—but it had been necessary—God knew how necessary! His present mission was the most fateful one of all his career—and every possible precaution was essential.

Back in America the papers had been told that

Washburn Rinehart, "the Power behind the Capitol," was holidaying in the Far East. Some of the Opposition papers had unleashed a gentle gibe at the expense of the Statesman in the White House, inferring that now the President would be able to govern without gaining the consent of his "sleeping-partner," or before signing his name to any measure.

Washburn Rinehart was the human enigma of America. One could understand one of the world's richest men desiring power, but it was difficult to appreciate why such an individual as Rinehart, possessing both in almost terrifying quantities, should keep himself resolutely in the background. Ever since he had made his influence felt in national affairs, he had refused to take any office whatever—but it was common knowledge that the President made no move unless first he "talked it over with Washburn."

It was what the Purser—a sour-looking man with a ludicrously red nose—styled a pig of a night. The Havre boat slithered and rolled in the contemptuous grip of an angry Channel. The dark decks were deserted; and as Rinehart had no wish to show himself in the smoking-lounge that was a blaze of electric light, he kept to his cabin. Always a bad sailor, he decided to get straight into bed.

He thought longingly of the comfort of the Savoy Hotel in London, where Dwight was already established by this time awaiting his return. What had caused Logan, his life-long friend and the President of the United States, to send that message at what

was practically the last moment, he could not tell. Of course there was a very sound reason, but—what?

He must wait for the answer to that until he reached Paris, where he was due to arrive at 11.56 the next morning.

One thing was certain : he would not be in Paris very long ; the Business was to be done in London : that had all been definitely arranged.

As soon as possible, he was going to pay his young nephew, Gilbert Chertsey, a visit. Ever since he had first seen this son of his only sister—now, like her husband, dead—he had taken a great interest in the young man's work. Like many other enormously busy men of affairs, Rinehart dearly loved a shocker—and he had not only read every book which his nephew had written, but he had thoroughly appreciated them.

Gilbert did not know of his arrival in Europe ; he would take the young rascal by surprise.

This grave man of affairs chuckled. The last time he had heard from his nephew, Chertsey had complained that he had run dry of ideas, and that he was afraid he would never be able to write another book.

" I shall have to give him a bit of a line on this present business—only all his readers will swear that the plot is too fantastic to be believed," he told himself.

Making sure once again that his cabin door was secure, and that the small book beneath his pillow was safe, the man from America sank gently off to sleep.

He awoke drowsily, to the sound of a winch rattling

and realised that he was at Havre. With the whining of tackle from the quay side, the stertorous snoring of funnels and the excited cries of the French porters, came a knock on the door. It was the steward with his morning coffee.

The weather was brilliantly fine, and Washburn Rinehart ate his breakfast with a hearty appetite: the murk of England had been replaced by the sunny smile of France.

As he lit a cigar, Rinehart decided that Fate had not dealt with him so badly after all. It was five years since he had been in Paris, and, if his luck held good, he was due to arrive with the sun shining. Light-hearted, pagan Paris with the sun shining. . . .

In that moment Washburn Rinehart did not feel his age. What man would have done?

SYLVESTER LADE, apart from running his Night Clubs, had a hand in many enterprises. Nothing came amiss to this shady character ; dope-addicts could have their craving supplied by him—at a price ; foolish Society girls, thirsting for hectic excitement, could have their wishes satisfied—also at a price. Amongst Lade's heavy correspondence frequently were letters from men in South American ports, who referred in their communications to “ goods received, and quite satisfactory.”

The night—or rather the morning after the incident at the Café of the Rosy Dawn, Sylvester Lade's thoughts turned towards two of these correspondents in particular. If it could be managed—and he saw no reason why it should not—he would be effectually rid of a girl who had become a nuisance.

It could not be said that Sylvester Lade possessed a conscience, but he wished London rid of Ann Trentham. There were two reasons why he desired this, but the chief was that, wherever he turned, he found the girl present,—and evidently keeping her eye upon him.

The bare fact of being watched meant nothing very much in his life.. For years he had been one of the most observed men in London. It amused him

to know that Scotland Yard kept a perpetual surveillance over him : there was nothing in being watched, provided you covered your tracks sufficiently well.

But there was a great difference in being watched by clumsy-disguised detectives and by a girl whose eyes were a constant reminder of something he would like to forget.

It was difficult to understand why Benisty had not moved in this matter himself. The possibility of Ann Trentham discovering anything was negligible, of course, but so long as she was in London, she constituted not only an annoyance, but a certain risk : she might make the acquaintance of men who, attracted by her beauty and inflexibility of purpose, would take up her case.

That she suspected him was obvious ; and if his connection with her father's business was once discovered, it might be extremely awkward. For that went beyond ordinary crime ; it was a State affair.

The girl would have to be got rid of : he had told himself so many times before, and last night's affair increased his determination. After what had happened, he wasn't quite certain of that guitar player. The yarn the fellow had pitched about being a friend of Ann Trentham's might have been an invention concocted at the moment, but it was highly probable that if they were not acquainted before, the girl would now make a friend of the man. A friend, and perhaps a confidant.

And then there was the other man Chertsey. How in the devil had she got to know him?

Benisty could be relied upon to control Chertsey, no doubt—after that spoof ceremony of initiation into The Black Heart, the man would be afraid of his own shadow. But the girl represented a distinct risk. He could not afford to have her prying about any longer. Once over the water, and in charge of either Manuel, the Yid, or Vezinolos, the Greek, her mouth would be effectively shut. And that proud face and beautiful figure . . . Sylvester Lade's unuttered thoughts showed in his stealthy smile.

Late as it was, he made a telephone call, and within twenty minutes a visitor arrived.

This man was a wasp-waisted, dark-skinned mongrel of various breeds. There are far too many vermin of this kind in London to-day. They are parasites battening on the vices and follies of mankind. Of such a type was this creature of Sylvester Lade.

The two held a brief but animated conversation, during which the mongrel's dark eyes glistened more than once.

"It shall be attended to, Meester Lade," the man said, and the conference broke up.

Chertsey was puzzled. What was the man's object in asking him this question? In any case, he had to be careful.

"I know nothing whatever about the lady," he replied; "she is practically a complete stranger to me."

Sylvester Lade smiled.

"So much the better for you," he said: "as Sir Luke Benisty told you last night, The Black Heart has an effective way of dealing with traitors—and I have already warned you against this girl Trentham." He walked to the door and flung it open. "You are to await your instructions, which will be sent to you soon," were his final words.

For the space of three minutes after the obnoxious caller had gone, leaving the air reeking of perfume, Chertsey roved about the room in the Bloomsbury flat. How he had been able to keep his hands off the man he did not know.

What did Lade's veiled threats mean? Like Benisty, he worked in the dark, a force hostile to everything that was clean, decent and orderly. He cloaked himself in a secrecy which could not be penetrated. Yet he must have meant some harm to Ann Trentham. Was he contemplating an outrage against the girl? The thought made Chertsey rush to the telephone. He must give her a warning.

The waiting whilst he was connected made him frantic, but the announcement of the Exchange—"I'm sorry, but there's no reply," steadied his nerve. He must control himself; this was a time for calm deliberation rather than precipitation.

And yet . . . Perhaps Sylvester Lade had already put his abominable plan into operation. Whatever the consequences to himself might be, he must see Ann and warn her. Perhaps he had been a fool to

trust to the telephone ; how could he tell that the line was not tapped ?

It was impossible to rest. But sufficient sense of caution remained for him to use the back entrance as he had done before, instead of leaving by the front door.

Picking up a taxi in Russell Square, he drove to the corner of the quiet West-end street in which Ann Trentham had her flat. The night was starless, a fact for which he was grateful. Still, he cut out all unnecessary risks, walking rapidly down the street like a man who had urgent business occupying his mind.

As he reached the entrance to the house, he was stopped from going in by a movement made by a man on the opposite pavement. This man had halted to light a cigarette—the action might be innocent enough, or on the other hand, he might be a hireling of Lade's. Without another glance, Chertsey walked on.

Arrived at a corner a hundred yards further down the street, he looked back at the possible spy. The man was still there, in a lounging attitude, as though waiting for someone. If the fellow was really watching the flat, he would have to dispose of him in some way before entering the house.

It was whilst he was occupied with this thought that Chertsey's attention was attracted by a motor-van turning the corner into Morris Street. Watching the direction the vehicle took he was surprised to notice that it drew up, so far as he could tell, outside

the house in which Ann Trentham had her flat. Another circumstance he noticed was that the man lounging opposite, crossed the road, engaged in a short conversation with the driver, and then walked away, being quickly lost in the darkness.

Now was his chance! He strode rapidly back down the street. He had not gone more than fifty yards when he saw two men emerge from Number 28. They were carrying a large old oak dower-chest. They placed this carefully in the van, and jumped into the vehicle, which then moved rapidly off.

Chertsey ran up the stairs to the first floor. He rang the bell outside the door on which was a small brass plate bearing the name Trentham, before discovering that the door was already open.

Suddenly panic seized him. He rushed inside, to find the small, but beautifully-appointed flat deserted. A sickly scent hung heavy on the air.

In the bedroom, resting on the bed as though they had just been taken off, were a hat, coat and a pair of gloves. With a stab of pain he remembered the hat: it was the one Ann Trentham had worn the afternoon they drove through Hyde Park.

That chest. . . .

He was back in the hall by this time, looking at a vacant space to the left of the door. On the polished wood was a thin coating of dust; the chest he had seen placed in the motor-van must have been resting there only a few minutes before. The imprints of a man's boots in the dust were proof of this.

He raced down the stairs like a madman. Two

minutes later he was talking almost incoherently to the taxi-driver he had told to wait at the corner of the street.

"Did you see a motor-van pass just now?"

The driver, throwing away the fag end of a gasper, stated that he had.

"Catch it up—follow it wherever it goes—double fare!" cried Chertsey, springing into the cab.

The man he addressed was not nonplussed—who has ever known a London taxi-driver nonplussed? Joshua Twinnell calmly resumed his seat, nonchalantly exclaimed: "Right y'are, guv'nor," pushed in his clutch, and was off on his quest.

How he contrived it, and what sixth sense he employed, are known only to Joshua Twinnell, but at the end of ten minutes—which time Chertsey had employed by poking his head in and out of the window like a jack-in-the-box, he leaned backwards and sideways and cried with hoarse triumph: "There she is in front, guv'nor, and if I lose her now, you can 'it me over the 'ead with me own spanner!"

Declining this invitation, but having complete confidence in Joshua Twinnell, Chertsey settled back to wait with as much patience as he could muster.

Thirty minutes by his watch sent him almost frantic again. It was one thing to be on the track of these men; it was another thing to follow them throughout the night.

Follow them be damned! He wasn't going to do any more following: with or without the aid of his

driver, he was going to stop the motor-van and demand to see what that dower-chest contained.

"Guv'nor!"

It was his driver's hoarse voice calling. He pushed his head out of the window, saw darkness all around him, and asked: "Where are we now?"

"Wandsworth—that's the Common over there." Joshua Twinnell's right hand pointed to a vast black patch. "The beauties in front 'ave turned down this road. Ah—they've stopped! Now what abart it? It's as black as a nigger's dial!"

The temptation to try to enlist this man's help occurred to him, but Chertsey was already adopting a campaigner's strategy. He must have the driver awaiting his return; even if he were successful in bringing Ann away, he would inevitably be pursued.

He jumped out of the cab.

"What's your name, driver?"

"Joshua Twinnell, guv'nor. May I arsk what the gime is?"

"A game of life and death possibly," was the swift retort. "I'm going into what may be serious trouble, Twinnell; when I come back, I may have a lady with me. I want you to turn your cab round, have your engine running, and once I'm inside, drive like the devil. I'll be responsible for anything that happens to the cab—and there will be a ten-pound note for you on top of all the other charges."

Twinnell's red, weather-beaten face broke into a likeable smile.

"Right y'are, guv'nor—and I'll 'ave me little spanner ready in case it's wanted."

Confident that he had an ally on whom he could count, Chertsey went swiftly ahead. There was no illumination, and the road—it seemed more a rough track than a road—appeared to lead nowhere. His spirits sank; had Twin nell been deceived or had he lied? He was still pondering the problem when, his eyes, grown by this time accustomed to the gloom, he was confronted by a dark, intangible mass. It was a house standing some distance back from the roadway.

Proceeding with more caution now, he crept near enough to the drive that led up to the house to notice with a fervent sense of gratitude that the taxi-driver had been right: there was the motor-van outside the front door.

Whilst considering what he should do next, he caught the sound of a motor engine being hurriedly shut off. More of them! He would have to hurry.

Leaving the carriage way and walking on the grass that led round to the back of the house, he stood for a moment wondering. The place was in complete darkness, but as he looked up, a light suddenly showed in an upstairs room. He felt himself shaking as he realised what that light might be disclosing.

So far as he could judge in the darkness, this house was of the modern bungalow type. Twelve feet or so above him was what looked like a balcony, with

two windows opening out on to it. But how to get there? He could not leap the distance, and there was nothing up which he could climb. He darted to the side of the house—and there—his luck was in, after all!—placed to catch rain from the roof, was a large, closed-in water butt. Using his hands as leverage, he vaulted on to this. Steadying himself, he judged that by climbing a few feet up the water pipe, he would be able to reach with his left hand the top rung of the verandah. He was not used to such acrobatic feats, had never excelled in them even as a schoolboy, and the bare thought of what he was about to attempt caused him to feel dizzy.

It had to be done, however, and he wasted no more time. Sheer determination enabled him to close the fingers of his left hand round the verandah rail. The next moment disaster came, for in his anxiety to get a firm grip, he overbalanced and was launched into space.

He felt that his left arm was being dragged from its socket, and it was in the desperate endeavour to relieve this anguish that he flung his right arm upwards. His fingers gripped something hard—and the next minute he was wriggling his body over the top rail. So confused was his state that he did not know what had given him the necessary leverage. What had happened was that his right foot had found the water pipe again and supplied a foothold to enable him to make that surprising spring.

He had gained his objective, but his troubles were by no means over, for, falling on the other

side of the verandah rail, he landed with such force on the floor of the balcony that for a moment he lay still, afraid that the noise had attracted the attention of those in the house.

But there came no sign that this had happened, and, after listening for a few moments, he tried the nearest French window. Rust crumbled in his hand, and the window opened. The occupants of the house could not have been expecting intruders, for it was not latched on the inside.

Stepping cautiously, Chertsey found himself in a long, narrow room running apparently the whole length of the back of the house, and packed chaotically with furniture. Twice, in the darkness, he bashed his shins before he was able to reach the door on the opposite side to the window.

To the right, as he now stood, stretched a carpeted staircase. The lighted room, his objective, was somewhere above, and he had to go up.

It may have been that the kidnappers were so preoccupied that they did not give a thought to being disturbed, but he was able to reach the door of this lighted room—an attic on the third floor, it was—without being accosted.

"Oh-h!"

A soft cry of agony sounded from within. It was enough: turning the handle of the door, he rushed into the room.

Three men turned. The surprise depicted on their faces was almost ludicrous. Then, with a roar of rage, the first charged at the intruder.

An instinct made Chertsey lower his head to dive at the man's legs. He secured his grip and brought his assailant down to the floor. Before he could rise, it seemed that an avalanche had hit him. The others had come to the attack.

The cold, deadly fury which possessed Chertsey gave him an unrealised strength. Now down, now up, he fought like one driven mad. Heavy blows were rained on him, but he did not feel their weight; the primeval, battling spirit which is in every civilised man, gave him a fierce, unbridled joy in wounding his foes.

It was an unequal contest, and could not have been expected to last. Chertsey was not a professional hero of fiction : he was just a plain, matter-of-fact man of thirty, yanked out of his ordinary, somewhat humdrum, certainly easy-going mode of existence and plunged without preparation or training into a succession of events which would have taxed the nerve and physical strength of the most hardened adventurer.

At length he was down—and down for the last time, because his breath was coming now in deep, sobbing gasps, each one of which caused intense agony. His foes redoubled their blows, uttering deep curses as each went home. What hellish bad luck was Chertsey's embittered reflection as he tried once again to rise, but was beaten back to the floor with a blow that made the blood spurt afresh from a previous wound on his lip.

" Tie him up ! " ordered a voice that held a greasy,

foreign accent. "He came to see the girl, no doubt—well, he shall!"

Chertsey's hands were quickly tied with strong cord which bit cruelly into the flesh. Weak and exhausted, his imagination ran riot. What were these swine going to do with him and the girl—Ann?

A man, wasp-waisted, rat-faced, mongrel-bred, looked down at him as he lay stretched helpless upon the floor.

"You know what you get for interfering?" said the greasy man he had heard speak before—"you get *this!*" The long blade of a knife flashed. "But you came to see the girl: she will fetch a good price where I shall send her!" An obscene chuckle followed the words.

Chertsey felt his head would burst. It couldn't be Ann Trentham of whom this disgusting reptile was speaking; not Ann . . . at the mercy of this conscienceless white-slaver. . . .

"Lift him up!" ordered the mongrel.

He attempted to struggle, but it was pathetically useless. Dragged forward, he found himself by the side of a bed. On this was stretched a girl, bound with ropes. It was Ann Trentham. Her eyes looked into his, and—God! the courage of her!—her lips flickered into a smile. The rest of her face was proud and aloof. She had sought to encourage him even in that extremity, but her attitude to her enemies was coldly disdainful.

Chertsey showed his own sort of courage. He

would not give these hounds the satisfaction of knowing that he was afraid for the girl, so he remained silent.

The wasp-waisted mongrel pointed to the bed.

"I have an agent waiting to receive her in Buenos Aires," he said. "I am sorry I cannot keep her myself—but business must come before pleasure. As for you," he flicked the ash from his cigarette into Chertsey's face, "you will not be able to do any more interfering, my friend, because you will be disposed of in another way."

A sharp voice suddenly stabbed the darkness from behind. It had a slight American accent.

"I'll ask all of you to put your hands above your heads," it said.

IN the instant that the voice of the unseen deliverer was heard, Chertsey looked again at Ann. The girl's face glowed; her lips were parted excitedly. She must know this rescuer! But who was the man?

The air became foul with oaths: the three white-slavers obeyed the stern injunction to lift their hands to the ceiling, but verbal filth oozed from their snarling lips.

"Stand away from that man!" was the next order. "And keep 'em up to the sky! I'm suffering from twitching fingers—a dangerous disease when carrying a gun—and it's liable to get the better of me at any moment!"

Chertsey warmed to the speaker, whoever he was; he liked his grim sense of humour. At first a twinge of jealousy had taken the flavour from the joy of being rescued, but this was now gone: relief at the knowledge that Ann was safe, barring a fatal slip by the stranger, had driven it away.

The man dominating the situation did not strike him as likely to make a slip. When Chertsey turned, after his former gaolers had stepped away a pace on either side, he saw a man of about his own age, slim, well-dressed, holding a revolver in a hand which was

as steady as a limb of steel. The stranger's eyes were twinkling, as though in appreciation of the *tableau*, but the rest of his clean-shaven face was stern. It was a face to inspire confidence, and Chertsey liked its owner on sight.

"I'll soon 'ave those fins of yours free, guv'nor," promised a second voice.

"Twinnell!"

"The very sime, guv'nor—and, as promised, me spanner in me 'and in case any of these beauties start yappin'."

How it had all happened, Chertsey did not stop to inquire; directly his hands were free, he rushed to the bed and, with the taxi-driver's knife, cut the girl's bonds. That accomplished, he feasted his eyes upon her face; and then, before he realised what was happening, he had caught her up and was holding her tightly in his arms—so tightly that he felt he could never allow her to go again.

She lay passive as though she were content. He did not reflect on the miracle until afterwards, when the spell was broken. At the time it seemed the most natural, if the most wonderful thing in the world that she should find rest and succour in his arms.

A marvellous knowledge dawned in Gilbert Chertsey's mind during those few precious seconds—*he loved this girl!* It seemed now that for the previous thirty years of his existence he had been waiting, all unsuspecting, to meet her. But once having found her, he would never let her go.

" Finished, Twinnell ? "

The privacy of Chertsey's Paradise was disturbed ; slowly he put the girl away from him.

Ann Trentham hung her head for a moment. She, too, might have been snatched from a separate existence.

" Mr. Miles ! How can I thank you ? " she said.

The stranger walked towards them.

" I was lucky—just blamed lucky ! " he replied, in a grave tone ; " and I owe a lot to this chap Twinnell. If he hadn't shown common-sense, I should not have got here."

Joshua Twinnell, glowing after his labour of tying up three prisoners, looked slightly bewildered by the praise. To cover his confusion, he breathed hard upon the spanner he carried, talisman-fashion, in his right hand.

Ann laughed. It was a laugh in which recovering confidence and relief from high nervous tension were equally mingled.

" I forgot," she said ; " you do not know each other. Mr. Chertsey, let me introduce you to Mr. Napoleon Miles."

The two men shook hands.

" Your name is apt, Mr. Miles, if I may say so," commented Chertsey ; " you supplied the Napoleonic touch to-night, at any rate ! "

Miles shook his head.

" I was just blamed lucky—that's all," he replied. " Exactly what happened was this : I had a feeling to-day, after thinking about last night, that Sylvester

Lade meant some mischief to you, Miss Trentham. To-night, before I started my show, I thought I would run round in the car and give you a hint of this. I arrived outside your flat to see a wildly-excited gentleman tearing out of the house. This struck me as being rather curious—I always suspect wildly-excited gentlemen who come tearing out of houses—and when I got upstairs and found your flat empty, with the door already open and the smell of chloroform in the air, I decided that it was up to me to follow the man who was in such a hurry."

"I was the man," supplied Chertsey.

The other looked at him with calculating eyes.

"It was dark at the time. Of course, I didn't know that you were a friend of Miss Trentham's, and when I saw a taxi move off from the corner of the street, I naturally concluded that you must be in it."

Napoleon Miles broke off to smile reminiscently.

"I'll tell the world that you wanted some trailing," he resumed, "but I stuck to the job because I imagined it would be worth while. When I got to the top of this road, I thought that I had lost you, but then stumbled across our friend Twinnell here. He was highly suspicious at first, and it was the nearest thing that he didn't use his spanner on me, but when I explained that I was anxious to rescue a young lady in trouble—I guessed that Sylvester Lade's idea was kidnapping—he became a brother-in-arms at once, told me how he had followed the motor-van

from Morris Street and offered to come along to lend a hand. A good guy, Twinnell! The thing now is what are we going to do with these men? I suggest leaving them here for the police to pick up. No doubt Scotland Yard will have all their histories off by heart and will be glad to see them again."

Chertsey nodded.

"Before we do that," he said, "I am going to teach one of them a lesson." He looked across at the mongrel, whose dark-skinned face was already yellow with fear.

Miles' mind leapt to the suggestion.

"I will just take Miss Trentham to my car and leave her in the charge of Twinnell, and then I will be back," he said.

He handed over his revolver and turned towards the girl.

Ann Trentham made no demur. Perhaps looking at the faces of her two friends caused her to realise that these men's minds were irrevocably made up. She left the room without comment of any kind.

Within three minutes, Napoleon Miles was back in the attic.

He became brisk and business-like.

"You want this swine stripped to the waist—that's your idea, isn't it?" he asked Chertsey.

The novelist nodded.

Chertsey picked up a piece of thin but strong rope which had been used to bind Ann Trentham, and tied several knots in one end.

A scream rose disgustingly. The mongrel had summed up the situation correctly. His face now was greyish-green with terror.

Miles completed the stripping of the wretch; what would not come off easily was torn ruthlessly.

"That clothes-hook will do," he said, pointing to a brass fixture screwed into the centre top panel of the door.

"It will do admirably in the absence of anything better," replied Chertsey.

As Miles started to drag him towards the door the mongrel burst into another high-pitched screaming wail.

"Stop, and I will tell you the man who made me do it!" he cried.

The appeal was fruitless. "We know the man already," commented Chertsey; "it was Sylvester Lade. One day I hope to do the same to him as I intend to do to you. White-slavers are flogged by the police with a cat-o'-nine-tails; this rope's end will possibly not hurt you nearly so much. Be thankful, swine!"

But the man continued to whine. The effect the disgusting sound had on Chertsey was to make him more determined. Any of his old acquaintances would not have recognised him in that moment. He looked a different person. An astonishing change had occurred: from the chronicler of other people's doings, he had become a man of action himself.

"Let him have it!" said Napoleon Miles.

Chertsey swung his rope . . . a shrill scream of pain tore the air . . . It was followed by several others. . . .

Five minutes later, with the door locked behind the unconscious white-slaver and his two companions, Miles and Chertsey went down to the waiting car, over which and its occupant, Twinnell had kept a zealous watch.

"Nothin's 'appened," announced the taxi-driver; "everyfink's been as quiet as the grave."

"Splendid, Twinnell!" Napoleon Miles put his hand into his pocket.

"Look here, this is my show," protested Chertsey. He took out some banknotes and handed them to Twinnell.

"But I can't be left out—I absolutely refuse!" rejoined Miles. Another banknote joined the others in the grimy hand.

"Blimy! Punch me somebody afore I wakes up!" said Twinnell. "I 'spose neither of you gents would like to engage me reg'lar?"

Miles chuckled.

"You're the right sort, Twinnell; where can you be found?"

"Outside the Hotel Majestic in Russell Square, guv'nor. And you've only got to give me a wink and the ole cab'll drive you anywheres you want ter go—and there'll be nothin' on the clock, see?"

"I won't forget."

"I have already tried to thank him," said a voice from the car.

"Gawd bless yer pretty fice, lidy, Josh Twinnell don't want no thanks from the likes of you ! If I'd only let meself go, I should have killed those three blighters !" He buttoned up his great coat. "If you gents are all snug and comfortable, I'll be getting back to the ole 'bus. Then, if you're returnin' to Town, I'll just lead the way."

The offer was accepted, and the journey back was made without mishap. It was decided not to go to the flat in Morris Street, and the car pulled up outside Napoleon Miles' rooms in a quiet Belgravia Square.

Ann Trentham's first thought was for her host.

"But your engagement to-night, Mr. Miles ? "

"I've finished with Sylvester Lade—as an employer, I mean," was the reply ; "as a matter of fact, I shouldn't be surprised if I become rather busy in quite another direction very soon. But look here, you good people," he quickly broke off, "what about a bite and a sup ? I always have sandwiches on tap, and there's whisky for you, Chertsey, and some wonderful old sherry—heaven's blessing on the man who invented it !—called, I understand, Bristol Milk. Two glasses, and you feel like pushing a 'bus over ! I can strongly recommend it—what do you say, Miss Trentham ? "

Ann's answering smile disclosed a fascinating dimple.

" You make it sound irresistible, Mr. Miles—thank you, I will."

" One moment, then ! " Napoleon Miles smilingly disappeared into an adjoining room.

" Who is he ? " whispered Chertsey, eagerly.

Womanlike, Ann answered the question by asking one herself.

" What do you think of him ? "

" He seems a thundering good chap ; but who is he ? "

She leaned towards him. Then came the sound of returning footsteps. " I'll tell you later," she promised.

Whoever cut those sandwiches was an artist ; they tasted delicious. Napoleon proved himself an admirable host. It was a happy party, and for the time being the night's previous events were forgotten.

In the act of laying down his glass, Chertsey remembered something.

" We forgot the chest," he said.

" What chest ? " asked Miles.

" The chest those men used to kidnap Miss Trentham," supplied the novelist.

Miles' bewilderment showed in his face.

" Mr. Chertsey is quite right," said Ann : " after I was chloroformed the men placed me in a dower-chest which stands in the hall of my flat. Of course, I was taken entirely by surprise. I had written Menzies, the big furniture firm, about upholstering a couple of chairs. When those men called to-night,

with their van, I naturally assumed they had come for the chairs, although it was so late. I turned round to take them into the sitting-room when one of them sprang on me from behind. A pad of chloroform was placed over my mouth, and, although I struggled hard to get free, I quickly lost consciousness."

Napoleon Miles pointed to the telephone.

"It's not likely those beauties have got free—Chertsey and I tied them up too securely for that—but I think it's time I rang up the police."

Ann touched his arm.

"I didn't say anything before, but I do not want the police in this affair, Mr. Miles."

Miles softly whistled.

"Just as you like, of course, Miss Trentham. But those men will be safer behind the walls of a gaol."

"I know—and I must take the risk of them interfering with me again. I have a sufficient reason. And the police would not take any action unless I prosecuted. That would mean my giving evidence and I do not desire to do that. Please do not think I am not very grateful for your help, Mr. Miles—I am—but the leader of those men was punished— —"

"Oh, he was punished right enough! Friend Chertsey saw to that."

"Then we will let the matter drop. Those scoundrels should have been taught a sufficient lesson by the time they are discovered."

Miles signified his surrender by a nod.

"I think Mr. Chertsey will agree with me that the next pressing question is: where are you going to stay now?"

"Yes," agreed Chertsey, "I certainly shall not consent to you returning to that flat to-night."

"I hadn't thought of doing so," said Ann; "my maid has gone to Essex to see her mother who is ill, and in any case I do not fancy sleeping there, at least not to-night. But I must return to lock things up." She rose as she spoke, holding out her hand. "Thank you once again, Mr. Miles."

Chertsey also rose. "I will see you to your flat, and afterwards to an hotel, Miss Trentham."

"I'll get a taxi," put in Miles; "will you catch cold without a hat?"

"Oh, dear no!"

"Goodbye, Chertsey; I hope to run across you again one day," remarked Napoleon Miles, cordially, two minutes later, as he shook hands.

"You were going to tell me about Miles," said Chertsey as the taxi moved off.

"Mr. Miles is a cabaret entertainer."

"What?"

"Yes. He plays the guitar and sings at the Café of the Rosy Dawn. It was there I met him for the first time last night. Sylvester Lade, finding me sitting alone, was very insulting, and was going to have me put out—"

"The hound!" came from between the listener's clenched teeth.

"The position had become very unpleasant," resumed Ann, "when Mr. Miles intervened. He was kind enough to save me from further humiliation and to put me into a taxi."

Chertsey turned to look at her.

"May I ask you a question, Ann?" he said.

The light from an electric standard showed a flush in her cheeks.

"You wonder why I go to such places as the Café of the Rosy Dawn alone—is that what you want to know?" she asked.

"Yes," replied Chertsey. "Ann," he continued, "when I saw you to-night—helpless—I felt I should go mad. Of course, I have no right to say this, I know that—but why will you expose yourself to such risks? Have I offended you?" as she remained silent.

"No," she answered; "you have not offended me. And after what you did to-night——"

"What I tried to do," he corrected, bitterly; "a nice mess I made of things; if it hadn't been for that fellow Miles——"

A hand touched his arm.

"You proved yourself a very brave man to-night, Mr. Chertsey——"

Again he broke in.

"You have allowed me to call you 'Ann,'" he pleaded; "won't you fall into line, and call me something else than 'Mr. Chertsey'?"

Her eyes met his very frankly.

"I will call you 'Gilbert' if you wish it—and if it would give you any pleasure," she replied.

"Pleasure! It would make me the happiest man in the world! I should just about turn dizzy with joy! Ann"—very suddenly—"I suppose you know I love you?"

He could gain nothing from the silence with which she received the words, but now that he had started, he was determined to rid his mind of its weight.

"This is madness, I know," he said, "but I've been mad ever since that first moment I saw you in Paris. I want to go on being mad—I like the sensation! And so, Ann, I tell you openly and frankly that I love you! No, for goodness' sake don't say a single word in reply. Just consider it part of my madness—but remember, also, that you are infinitely dear to me, and that when I think of you in danger, it makes me frantic. To-night I half killed that beast who kidnapped you!"

Again her hand touched his arm.

"I shall always remember what you have told me, Gilbert. And not only remember it, but treasure it."

The taxi stopped outside the house in Morris Street.

Chertsey waited in the hall of the flat whilst Ann collected a few things and packed them in a suitcase. He then drove with her to the quiet

residential hotel she had selected in the West Central district.

" You will run no more risks ? " he pleaded when he left her.

" I cannot promise that," she said, " but I will try to be more careful in the future."

With that he had to be content.

S YLVESTER LADE chewed fiercely on the cigar he had not yet lit. The expected telephone message was over two hours late. What had happened to Gomez? This was the first time he had known the man fail.

He sat down by the side of the instrument and took off the receiver.

"Wandsworth 0123X," he ordered sharply.

As second succeeded second, Lade's impatience threatened to overpower him. He rattled the telephone repeatedly.

"I'm sorry—but there's no reply," said a man's voice from the Exchange.

"No reply!" raved Sylvester Lade; "don't be a fool!—there must be a reply! Try them again!"

"Exchange's" answer was firm but unruffled.

"All I can say is that I cannot get you a reply, sir, but I will ring them again."

"Yes—instantly, please!"

Two minutes later, the fuming Lade received another confirmation that he could not get connected.

"Blast the fool!" he cried, smashing the receiver back on to its hook.

This meant that he would have to go out to the place himself—at that hour! Gomez's instructions had been implicit enough; the job should have been easy—then what in the hell could have gone wrong? Directly Gomez had the girl safely at the Wandsworth house, he was to have 'phoned.

Brrrh! The 'phone!

"Hullo!" he called, snatching off the receiver.

"Who is that speaking?" came the prompt reply. The voice was authoritative. Moreover, it was distinctly British. It was not the voice of Gomez, the mongrel.

Lade rapidly considered.

"Who are you?—and where are you speaking from?" he asked.

"A house called 'The Bungalow' in Ferndale-road, Wandsworth Common. I am Police-Inspector Turner of the Wandsworth Police. I have been called to this house on account of a remarkable occurrence. I must have your name and address, please—if you are the person who has been recently ringing up this house."

"I don't know what you are talking about, Inspector. I was trying to get through to a friend of mine in Clapham—and the fools at the Exchange must have switched me through to the wrong number. Sorry to have bothered you, Inspector; good-night!"

He rang off immediately. Gomez must have blundered things. Something had gone wrong—and the evidence was on view at the "Bungalow." But who could have brought the police into the

business? And had they discovered the girl? If so, she might give his name.

He started as the 'phone signal whirred again. Curiosity drove him to the instrument after caution had warned him not to answer.

"Yes?"

"I want to see you instantly, Lade," said a voice that had a steely edge to it; "instantly, understand! Come to Berkeley Square at once!"

"Yes, Chief." Sylvester Lade's tone was quiet, respectful, bordering on the submissive. For the speaker was Sir Luke Benisty, the one man in the world of whom he was afraid.

When, a quarter of an hour later, he stood facing Benisty, he found the man to whom he gave allegiance, shaking with rage.

"You have meddled, Lade!" he said, in a chilling tone; "who gave you authority to molest the girl, Ann Trentham?"

Sylvester Lade put up his defence.

"She was dangerous—I have said so many times, Chief. And she was always watching me. I thought it was best she should be put out of the way—I have arranged for her to be sent to South America."

"*You* thought—*you* arranged!" came the scornful answer; "what right have you to take on yourself such a prerogative? Surely you should have remembered that it is *I* who do the thinking, and the arranging—and that you merely carry out my orders!"

The other was shaken by that cultured, but terrible voice, yet he showed courage of a sort, standing his ground.

"I repeat, very respectfully, Chief, that the time had come to put the Trentham girl out of the way. What I did, I did as much for your sake as for my own. Now that we're talking about this, I should like to say that I cannot understand why you have not moved in the matter yourself. The girl is dangerous ; she has already nobbled that fellow Chertsey."

Sir Luke Benisty did not relent.

"Do you acknowledge that you should have consulted me in this matter ? "

"Yes, Chief, I do."

"Very well, then you are committed by your own words ! Please understand once and for all time that henceforth I will not allow this sort of thing. I go further, and absolutely forbid it. Do you know what has happened to-night ? "

Sylvester Lade thought it politic to feign ignorance.

"No," he answered.

"A Portuguese half-breed named Gomez was discovered by the police to-night at his house near Wandsworth Common, in an insensible condition. Someone had stripped him to the waist, and flogged him mercilessly with a knotted rope. This, stained with blood, was discovered near by. Two other men, evidently companions of Gomez, were in the same room. Both were bound hand and foot."

Sylvester Lade's composure was shattered.

"Who did it?" he demanded. "My instructions to Gomez were to take the girl to his house, get what information he could out of her, and then arrange for her to be shipped to Buenos Aires."

The fine, aristocratic face of Sir Luke Benisty became livid.

"You dog! You were going to sell her into White Slavery, then?"

"Why not?" snapped the other; "apart from murder, it was the most effectual way to deal with her."

Benisty controlled himself with an obvious effort, and put out a hand as though to push the other away.

"If you had succeeded, Lade, I would have killed you with my own hands!" he said; "understand that whatever action is to be taken with regard to the Trentham girl, it will be taken only by me!"

The threat subdued Sylvester Lade's growing sense of indignation.

"If that is your order, Chief, all right," he forced himself to reply. "What happened to the girl?"

"Apparently she escaped—my information does not include where she is at present."

"May I ask how you got this information, Chief?"

A bleak smile showed on the cultured face.

"You are not the only person, Lade, who has friends in the police. No doubt you are also curious as to the means by which this business at Wandsworth was discovered? It appears that your man

Gomez has been under observation for some time. No doubt his White Slave activities have attracted attention. To-night a policeman visited his house with a search-warrant. Not receiving any answer, but noticing a light burning in an upstairs room, he forced a window and broke in. Any other question?"

Lade intimated he had nothing further to say. It was a bad night's work, and he wished to forget everything connected with it—especially the thought that the police had by this time probably acquired the knowledge that it was he who had put through two imperative telephone calls to the house at Wandsworth.

Sir Luke Benisty was suave and cordial.

"The time has come for me to give you your first instructions, Mr. Chertsey," he said. "The commission which I want you to execute is not only a very simple one, but should bring with it a great deal of pleasure. Briefly, all I want you to do is to proceed to Paris by the first available train—there is one from Victoria at eleven o'clock this morning—and go to the Hotel Charles VII. where your room is already booked."

"And what do I do there?" inquired the new member of The Black Heart.

"The simplest thing," rejoined Benisty, with another agreeable smile; "staying at the hotel at the present time is a man named Forbes—James Forbes. That is not his right name, but it is the name

he has signed in the hotel register. What I wish you to do is not to let Mr. Forbes out of your sight. In other words, I wish you to cultivate his acquaintance and make a friend of him."

"Can you describe this man to me, Sir Luke?"

"I am afraid I cannot give you a very reliable description, beyond the fact that he has rather a commanding figure and is between fifty and sixty years of age. But once you are in the hotel, it should be quite easy for you to locate him.

"A word of warning, Mr. Chertsey! You must on no account lead him to think that we of the Society of The Black Heart has any interest in him; to do so would be disastrous." The speaker paused to study the younger man's face. "Forbes is an international malefactor of the worst description. He has set the law at defiance and, consequently, The Black Heart has determined to punish him for his various misdeeds. I will be frank with you, Chertsey; you are to act as a decoy in connection with this man—but you need have no conscience-qualms on that account: the sooner 'James Forbes' is removed from the sphere of his present activities, the better it will be for humanity! Remembering that, I do not want you to fail in this first commission, Chertsey. Further instructions will be sent to you at the Hotel Charles VII."

A shrewd, calculating scrutiny, a handshake—and Chertsey was left to his reflections. Evidently Sir Luke Benisty was no sluggard; it was still only nine o'clock.

Keenly as he would have liked to see Ann before he left, Chertsey decided that it would be too risky for him to attempt to do so. Sir Luke Benisty's manner had told him that something big was in the wind ; some great *coup*, perhaps, was being planned by The Black Heart. The part the man Forbes was to play in the scheme he did not know, of course, but he was prepared to bet on one point : that was that 'James Forbes' had a somewhat different character to the one given him by Sir Luke Benisty.

What he personally should do when he met the man was a decision that must be left to the future but every instinct now warned him to be on his guard. What Sir Luke Benisty had just told him was doubtless a carefully-concocted pack of lies, concealing perhaps the giant conspiracy of which Ann Trentham had hinted.

It maddened him to think that he could not see her before he left, but at least he could write. His fountain pen flew over the paper—

"Ann,

"Directly you have read this, burn it. I have just been given my first job. What it is I had better not tell you because I think that the knowledge might be dangerous. It sounds simple—but I am sure it's not.

"I want you to keep out of things ; you know what I mean. Promise me that ! Soon I shall be in this business up to my neck, I am thinking, and

*what is to be found out please leave to me. I may
muff it—but you mustn't run any more risk.*

*"I will write again when I have something to
say.*

"G. C."

The letter posted at Victoria Station, Chertsey took his seat on the Continental train with a light heart. The prospect of the forthcoming adventure,—for that an adventure awaited him in Paris he was convinced—was thrilling. Moreover, he felt that whatever danger he might be going into was being undertaken for the sake of the girl he loved. He had taken the matter out of Ann Trentham's hands now and had shouldered the responsibility himself. The thought was very satisfying.

Until he arrived at the Gare du Nord, he resolved to give his mind a holiday. So it was an apparently care-free young man who boarded the boat at Dover and stepped into the Paris Express on the other side of the Channel. The tip he gave the red-faced giant of a Calais porter was of such a handsome character that the man wished him a thousand *bon voyages* in one wonderful burst of volubility.

Bon voyage! Was it to be a good journey? He wondered.

At seven o'clock that night, looking well in his evening kit, Gilbert Chertsey strolled towards the handsome dining-room of the Hotel Charles VII.,

which, as all the world knows, is situated just off the Grand Boulevard.

As he turned in through the swing-doors, a man of fifty-five caught his arm.

" Gilbert ! By all that's wonderful ! "

Chertsey turned round to see his American uncle—the man who had registered as James Forbes.

THERE was no question of his uncle's delight, and Chertsey's own feeling was one of happy surprise. Although he knew little of Washburn Rinehart, he had liked the man immediately, and the hospitality he had received from him in America was a most pleasant memory.

"Hello, sir!" he replied; "this is splendid! What lucky chance brought you to Paris? And why didn't you let me know you were coming to Europe?"

The other affectionately pressed his arm.

"I wanted to keep it as a surprise," he smiled; "but you've turned the trick on me: I meant to look you up in London—and here you are in Paris! How's the new novel getting on? Got that plot yet?" Rinehart smiled as though at a secret thought.

Chertsey was some time before he replied. This uncle, whom he had discovered somewhat late in life, was deeply experienced in men and affairs. Without giving any names, should he tell him the truth about his present visit to Paris? The advice of such a man, and one who was nearly double his age, would probably be valuable. Nevertheless, a second later he decided against the suggestion; he

did not wish to appear a fool to Rinehart, whose keen sense of humour would probably cause the other to chaff him mercilessly. Whilst he had stayed with him in America, his uncle had on several occasions stated his dislike for any "frills"; his guiding principle through life had been the use of plain "horse-sense," he often said. Could such a man possibly be expected to believe in a story so fantastic and bizarre that even the narrator, now that he looked back upon the events of the past few days, could scarcely credit them himself?

"What's the matter, boy? You look worried," broke in Rinehart.

Chertsey shrugged his shoulders, before seizing on the opening which had presented itself.

"It's only that wretched new book," he prevaricated; "every plot for a thriller has already been used—unless one writes something which is too impossible to be believed."

Washburn Rinehart chuckled again.

"Let's have some dinner," he said. "I never eat so well as when I'm in Paris. There must be a tonic quality in the air. After dinner, we'll have a talk. It might happen that I can start you off on an idea. You may think it far-fetched—but I can vouch for its truth. Life is sometimes stranger than even the New York Sunday newspapers, Gilbert, my boy!"

They had reached the much-coveted corner table by this time, and Jules, the world-famous *Maitre d'hôtel*, was smilingly awaiting their command.

Washburn Rinehart immediately joined him in conference, ordering with a surety that won Jules' frequent approbation.

"An admirable choice, monsieur," he finally commented.

"I am glad to see they are showing you proper respect, sir," remarked Chertsey. The remembrance had come to him swiftly that this uncle of his was a very important man in his native land. Rinehart had not talked much about politics when he was in America, but the novelist remembered significant remarks that had been made to him by other people and recalled snatches of conversation and newspaper paragraphs that he had read in the American press at the time.

His uncle was now busy with the wine waiter, a man whose almost abysmal gloom of countenance was lightened as he received the American's instructions.

"Bien, m'sieur!"

"I am delighted to see you, my boy," said Rinehart, "but I have ordered what should be quite a good dinner, and I want you to do justice to it. So, with your permission, conversation will languish. Afterwards I promise you, I will tell you something worth listening to."

Chertsey, laughing, fell in readily with the mood. His uncle, he remembered, was something of a *gourmet*.

"Well, here's to so-called dry America, sir," he said, lifting his glass of Pol Roger; "you

haven't anything better than this in your cellar, I know."

Rinehart, his mouth appreciatively full of *filet mignon*, playfully frowned.

"I'm not supposed to have a cellar, but nevertheless, there's some 1914 Pol Roger in it quite as good as this—but, lordy, don't ask me what I had to pay for it!"

It was a meal worthy of the attention which was now bestowed upon it. The cooking was in accordance with the famous Hotel's *cuisine*, the service was admirable, and, final attribute, there was no music!

Three-quarters of an hour after they had sat down, Washburn Rinehart produced from his case two superb Corona cigars.

"We'll have coffee in the smoking room, Gilbert," he announced.

It seemed to the novelist that their departure was noted by many pairs of curious eyes.

He commented upon this fact once they were comfortably settled in two leather easy chairs at the far end of the big smoking room.

"That's your writer's imagination," said Rinehart; "at least, I hope it is. Not a soul in this Hotel is supposed to know who I really am." Then, before his nephew could voice any surprise at the statement, the American continued: "I am in Europe on a secret mission for the President. How's that for a start for your new story? Naturally, I can't tell even you all the facts, and what I do tell you will

have to be carefully disguised if you use it. But here is the plain, unvarnished truth : Europe—not one single country but the whole of it—looks like being in such a mess very soon that the late War compared to it will seem like a picnic party. Only one thing can stop this hell from breaking loose, and that is the action which America decides to take. More than that I cannot tell you at the moment, but the President has sent me over here as his special confidential envoy to meet the highest officials in England and France. The greatest secrecy had to be observed from the beginning ; so much so, in fact, that I travelled on the boat sufficiently changed in appearance as to be taken for another man. Meantime, the American Press has been announcing that I am on holiday in the Far East. I was going direct to London, but twenty-four hours before the ship was due at Southampton, I had a wireless message in the President's own private code. Arrangements have been altered apparently, because this message told me to proceed to Paris first. I am now awaiting further instructions, but have already arranged an interview with the French Premier to-morrow morning at eleven o'clock at the Quai d'Orsay."

The cigar trembled in Chertsey's hand.

"Under what name did you register here, sir ?" he asked.

"My present name is 'James Forbes,'" replied Washburn Rinehart ; "you must always address me as 'Forbes'—and it would be inadvisable, I think, to let anyone in the hotel know that we are related."

"Who did the disguising?" the novelist found himself asking.

His uncle smiled reminiscently.

"Do you remember Dwight?"

"He was your valet, wasn't he?"

"Yes. An amusing cuss—and a most reliable fellow. He touched my face up every morning, and dressed my hair differently, so that I changed from Washburn Rinehart to James Forbes, an American buyer of Yorkshire woollen goods. The only other person in the know was the captain of the boat."

Chertsey was inclined to shout; his pent-up feelings required a vent; there were other men who knew the secret, apart from the skipper of the *Morengaria* and Dwight, his uncle's valet. Something of the damnable purpose of The Black Heart now became partially clear: he had been initiated into that peculiar Order, not because he was presumed to be a ruined gambler, not because it was thought that the lure of possible adventure would appeal to him, but because of his known relationship to that friend of the United States President, Washburn Rinehart.

"A remarkable story, sir; it should make a jolly good foundation for a novel. Just my stuff, too."

He had to say something, but the words did not represent the true product of his thoughts. Ever since Rinehart had started to tell his story and had stated that he was travelling *incognito*, he had jumped

to the conclusion that his uncle must be the man in whom The Black Heart were so interested. What was he to do? That was the all-important, vital question. Sir Luke Benisty was probably aware by this time that the two had met—no doubt a spy of that aristocratic scoundrel had occupied a seat in the dining-room that night. He would also be aware that, directly he (Chertsey) discovered that Mr. James Forbes was none other than his own uncle, he would discount the statement that the latter was an International criminal whose actions had placed him outside the law, and whom the Society of The Black Heart were resolved to punish.

His predicament was acute. On the one hand there was his oath. This had been a solemn declaration, although he had been forced to make it. In the present circumstances he would have every excuse, of course, to forfeit his pledge, but—and this was a very serious factor—he had sufficient respect for the Organisation to be assured that a betrayal on his part would meet with swift and effective reprisals. He would have ignored the threat of personal vengeance, but the punishment would go further than that: it would mean that he would be placed very much *hors de combat* and incapacitated to take any further action. This would mean, in turn, that his promise to Ann Trentham would be worthless. The situation resolved itself into a nice problem of ethics, and an immediate solution seemed extremely difficult. But

so swiftly was his brain working under this stimulus, that only a few more seconds had elapsed before he had planned a way out of the *impasse*.

He turned to his uncle, who was surveying the long ash on his cigar.

" You must forgive me, sir, if I raise what seems to be an elementary point," he said.

The older man turned to him indulgently.

" Say anything you like, my boy."

" Well, sir, it strikes me that you are running a certain risk in being foot-loose and alone in Paris like this. If the situation in Europe is as serious as you say, the position apparently is that you are the only person standing in the way of about the most unholy mess civilisation has ever known. Isn't that so ? "

Washburn Rinehart blew a cloud of smoke.

" Yes," he agreed, " I suppose that is the exact state of affairs."

" And yet," continued his nephew in a more agitated tone, " here you are, living openly in one of the best known hotels in Paris ! It's true you are supposed to be a nondescript buyer of woollen goods, but there must be hundreds of persons who realise who you really are ! Look here, Uncle, Paris is one of the biggest centres in Europe for International criminals—you must know that even better than I do. What is more, it is always full of Secret Service Agents. Good God, sir, do let me warn you to be on your guard ! Why don't you get protection from your Embassy ? "

Rinehart patted the speaker's arm across the small table.

"My Gosh, Gilbert, you talk like one of your own books!" he exclaimed, amusedly; "it just thrills me to listen to you! All that you say may be true, but I never travel without a little steel friend in a back pocket, and I guess if there is any funny business I can prove myself as quick on the draw as most men. Besides, while that kind of stuff is fine to read about in books, it doesn't happen any longer in real life."

"But I implore you to listen to me, sir," rejoined Chertsey. "The most impossible things are quite likely to happen—they are happening every day—happening now. You said yourself, a few moments ago, that it was necessary for you to be disguised on board the liner—how much more important then is it that you should take the greatest care now that you are in Paris!"

Rinehart became more thoughtful.

"But France is a friendly country," he rejoined; "what I mean is that up till now France has refused to come into this gigantic conspiracy against the peace of Europe."

"I suppose it's Germany again?" asked the novelist, breathlessly.

"Germany—and someone even bigger."

The listener seized his uncle's arm.

"Don't you see," he replied, fiercely, "that the agents, the spies, the underground-men of these Powers must be swarming in Paris? And there are

others——” He stopped suddenly. He had done all he could ; and in his present mood his uncle might scoff at the real truth were he to tell it to him.

Throwing the butt of his cigar into the fire, Washburn Rinehart now rose.

“ This isn’t the kind of talk that should follow a thoroughly good dinner, Gilbert,” he said, with an air of finality ; “ if you don’t mind, we won’t discuss this matter any more—at least not to-night. I have to pay an interesting call and I should like to take you with me.”

“ I’ll be very pleased to come, sir,” said Chertsey, quickly. After what had gone before, he was determined not to allow his uncle out of his sight. When the storm broke, as it would very soon, he felt convinced, he would be by Rinehart’s side to render what assistance was possible.

“ Ever heard of the Club they call Le Sport, here ? ” asked his uncle.

“ No—what is it ? ” He was instantly on his guard ; he knew sufficient of Paris to be aware that the term might cover a multitude of things.

“ You needn’t look so worried,” said Rinehart, reassuringly ; “ Le Sport is not an Apache den nor a questionable Montmartre night resort ; it’s the Parisian Sportsmen’s most exclusive Club, to which admittance is only possible to the favoured few, and where the credentials of even these have to be impeccable. It is situated in the Avenue Wagram, off the Champs Élysées, and is of its kind, I understand, the seventh wonder of the world. They say the

sky is the limit when the members sit down to play."

"Who's your sponsor, sir?" asked Chertsey.

"A fellow who's well known to the Embassy crowd, and whose full name is a mouthful—M. le Comte René de Guichard. As you may imagine, he is the real thing in aristocrats. He is a member of Le Sport, and has kindly offered to introduce me to-night. There should be no difficulty about you coming along as well. The experience should be useful to you."

"What's my character to be—nephew, or merely a friend?"

"Oh—nephew. That should make it easier for le Comte to get you in. According to Guichard, you can sometimes see Bridge being played there for as much as a thousand dollars a hundred. There is roulette, baccarat and other little swindles." The speaker laughed. "I may have a flutter myself—Paris always makes me feel twenty years younger, Gilbert, my boy. But, come, let's go up to my room."

It was a large, well-appointed bedroom on the second floor. Its furnishings included two massive easy-chairs and a roomy settee. Rinehart locked the door immediately after entering.

"I have been thinking over what you said just now, Gilbert," he remarked; "you see this?" he continued, taking a leather dispatch case from a stout pig-skin kit-bag, ~~formidably~~ fitted with two locks.

" Contains something of value, does it ? "

His uncle smiled somewhat grimly.

" If there is anything in your sensational remarks just now, Gilbert, what's in here," tapping the despatch case, " ought to fetch a pretty big price in certain quarters. A million pounds would possibly be the lowest bid. No," answering Chertsey's look of inquiry, " I'm not going to tell you anything more about the contents because it's perhaps better that you should not know. Knowledge in this case may possibly be dangerous.

" But it's only a fool who does not take precautions," the American went on. " That kit-bag has two double locks, but there's nothing to prevent an ambitious thief from stealing it, and extracting the contents at his leisure."

" What about the Hotel safe ? " submitted Chertsey.

The other shook his head.

" No, I don't like the idea of anyone else knowing that this is in my possession," he replied. " Years ago I made the acquaintance of a well-known private detective. He told me that the reason so few clever crooks were caught with their spoils was because they used their brains. I intend to use what few I have to-night—always assuming that your surmise is correct, Gilbert."

He walked over to the roomy settee and picked up the middle of three loose cushions fitting the seat.

" Have you ever noticed," Rinehart asked, " how

anyone taking a seat on a thing like this," pointing to the settee, "always chooses a corner? That means that the middle seat is generally unoccupied. Now for a little innocent deception."

Whilst Chertsey stared in astonishment, not realising yet what was in the other's mind, Washburn Rinehart ran a sharp bladed pocket knife carefully along the corded edge of the cushion, but only deep enough to cut the outer fabric. The slit thus made was about six inches long and was in the centre. That done, he unlocked the despatch case and took from it a flat oilskin envelope somewhat resembling a tobacco pouch, and gently inserted this into the middle of the cushion, taking care not to disturb the inner lining. He placed it back on the settee and then turned to Chertsey with a little triumphant smile.

"I'll bet that's reasonably safe!" and with another laugh: "if anything should happen to me, my boy, you'll know where those papers are. And now we must be hustling. I arranged to be at the Club to meet M. le Comte at nine o'clock. Things won't be in full swing yet, but we shall see sufficient to interest us, no doubt."

"The seventh wonder in the world" in gaming houses proved to consist of a great mansion that had once housed one of the noblest families in France. The residence, when left by the last occupier, had been bought by a committee of aristocratic Parisian sportsmen, and a mint of money expended in transforming it into a club.

Handing his card to the gorgeously-uniformed hall-porter, Rinehart and his companion were escorted into a waiting-room, where the Louis Quinze furnishing made the American's eyes shine with envy.

Five minutes' wait and then a knock on the door. The next moment a man burst into the room, bringing with him a flood of excited French.

"A thousand welcomes, *mon ami!* " he said to Rinehart ; " I am enchanted ! "

M. le Comte René de Guichard was a small man of indeterminate age, immaculately-dressed, with a pale face from which a pair of startlingly dark eyes shone in a somewhat disconcerting manner. He was heavily flavoured with scent, and as he talked, a pair of small, over-manicured hands, white as any woman's, gestured unceasingly.

Gilbert Chertsey mentally called him a very rude name within a moment of meeting. M. le Comte René de Guichard was possibly an aristocrat, but he was also a person of unsavoury thoughts and habits unless all his intuitions were badly at fault.

" This is my nephew, Gilbert Chertsey, " announced Rinehart.

" Enchanted to meet you, Monsieur Chertsey ! " said le Comte, graciously ; " please understand that you are my very welcome guests to-night, and that the Club is thrown open to you in the widest sense. I am sure you will be interested."

Interested was scarcely the word. Early as was

the hour, the many spacious rooms devoted to various forms of gambling, were thronged. Several nationalities contributed to the gamesters ; there was an Indian prince and a Japanese nobleman, playing roulette in the same company as two deposed European kings and a French race-horse owner, whose wealth was stated to be fabulous. In the baccarat room, an English Jew, high in the regard of the present British Government, was holding an enormous bank. Chertsey was able to imagine himself back at the Sporting Club at Monte Carlo—but in this room there seemed no limit to the wagering. Only millionaires could go this pace.

The croupier having reached out his long spatule and gathered in the monies of the losers of the last coup, made his challenging cry : *Messieurs, faites vos jeux. Les jeux sont faites. Rien ne va plus !*

" We'll watch for a bit, eh ? " whispered Rinehart, and Chertsey nodded. The scene was intensely stimulating and he forgot everything else.

The Jew cast his gentle eyes round the table. It was evident he had been winning heavily. Yet, with incomparable aplomb he showed no sign of excitement—not even when a single wager of 200,000 francs was swept towards him by the croupier.

The loser, a short, swarthy-faced South American, whom Rinehart whispered was a multi-millionaire cattle-king, turned to him with a hard, defiant glance.

" There is no limit, you say ? "

The croupier looked at the banker, and the Jew slightly smiled.

"There is no limit," he repeated in a quiet, impersonal tone.

The cattle-king, who had apparently been waging a desperate duel with the Banker, placed a fresh huge pile of notes upon the table.

"The amount of the wager, monsieur?" inquired the croupier.

"Two hundred thousand francs!" snapped the other.

There were no other bets. The banker took a card from the box and passed it across to his opponent. He was perfectly calm and completely self-possessed. His pale olive face looked almost bored. In that moment the Oriental descent of the man could easily be traced. Taking another card from the box for himself, he idly tossed a second to the South American before helping himself to another.

The crowd of watchers leaned forward, some of the spectators in their excitement uttering short, stifled, staccato cries.

"Rubenstein has the devil's luck!" exclaimed a man standing to Chertsey's right; "nothing can stop him winning."

Indeed, it seemed so—the Banker had drawn a five and a four and threw them down on the table immediately, face uppermost. The cattle-king's cards were a knave and a six. Consequently, the Banker having the required number of nine in his two cards, won the coup.

Although he had gained another two hundred thousand francs within the last two minutes, Rubenstein looked more bored than before.

Chertsey, turning swiftly to comment to his uncle on the Jew's immobility, was surprised to find that Rinehart had disappeared. It was not, however, until ten minutes later, when his uncle was still missing, that he felt the first premonition that something was wrong. Before that, he had assumed that Washburn Rinehart had been called away to engage in conversation with his host of the evening; but le Comte René de Guichard, when he spoke to him on the subject, made the startling statement that he had not himself been in the Baccarat room, nor had he sent for the missing man.

His misgivings increasing considerably at this remark, which he had no option but to accept, of course, Chertsey, with de Guichard by his side, commenced a systematic search of the rooms.

Washburn Rinehart was not in any of them! What was more, neither the members nor the club servants professed to having seen him.

The novelist felt that he was in a nightmare of his own imagining, yet common sense assured him that, by some uncanny means, Rinehart had been spirited away—and under his very nose.

For what purpose? For some damnable purpose without a doubt—a purpose in which the Society of The Black Heart must have a hand.

When an hour had passed, M. le Comte René de

Guichard declared himself to be on the brink of madness.

"To imagine, Monsieur, that such a thing could have happened in Le Sport—and to my own guest, too! Can it be possible that your uncle received a message? A message of such importance that he left the club at once without wishing you farewell?"

Chertsey subjected the speaker to another keen scrutiny. He had disliked this man on sight, disliked him still more upon a better acquaintance, and was fully prepared to discover that de Guichard had played a part in this sinister game himself. But these were all surface impressions after all; there was no direct evidence.

"I scarcely think it likely, M. le Comte," he replied, "but, all the same, I should be grateful if you would have fresh inquiries made on that point."

"*Certainement, Monsieur!*" Le Comte led the way to the imposing vestibule. Here he summoned the hall-porter, addressing him in rapid French.

The man pondered. Then he spoke to Chertsey: "Of a certainty I did not see the gentleman leave the club, Monsieur. But"—with his hand to his forehead—"now I come to think again, I have a slight recollection of seeing a gentleman who might have been M'sieur's uncle, getting into a taxi-cab over there"—he pointed to the opposite side of the Avenue.

"What time was this?"

" It might have been an hour ago, M'sieur."

M. le Comte clapped his woman's hands.

" You hear, Monsieur Chertsey ! It is what I say : your uncle received an urgent message and left the club so hurriedly that he did not stop to wish you *au revoir*."

" I cannot quite understand that," replied Chertsey ; " he was standing by my side when I last saw him. However—" He turned to the hall porter. " Was this gentleman alone ? "

The man's memory seemed to be rapidly improving. The words now came more volubly.

" No, M'sieur—the gentleman was with another. This second was very tall—much taller than Monsieur himself—and he walked like this." The speaker stooped his shoulders.

The man's gesture brought a vivid memory into Chertsey's mind. With the thought of The Black Heart at the back of his brain, it was natural, perhaps, for the hall-porter's words to conjure up a recollection of an abominable member of that evil company. Could it be that the very tall, stoop-shouldered man was Barrington Snell ?

He made a rapid decision. With Washburn Rinehart spirited away, it was his obvious duty to guard—with his life, if needs be—that oilskin packet which his uncle had taken the precaution to secrete in his bedroom earlier in the evening.

" No doubt you are right, M. le Comte," he said, dissembling ; " after this statement of the hall-porter, your explanation sounds most feasible. I

do not think I will wait, however; should my uncle return, perhaps you will be kind enough to inform him that I have gone back to the hotel and will wait for him there?"

M. le Comte René de Guichard replied vociferously that he would be enchanted to deliver the message. Chertsey, on his part, felt that he would be enchanted to kick this pasty-faced, over-mannered fop the length of the vestibule, but, with a short bow to the fellow, he walked down the steps.

The night was fine, and, although he felt it was necessary for him to be at the Hotel Charles VII as soon as possible, he decided to walk. He could think better when swinging along at a rapid pace; and this problem, although perfectly clear in its main essential feature, required a considerable amount of thought.

The Enemy had shown brains. He was not surprised at this, but the knowledge did little or nothing to soothe his wounded pride. He had made a vow with himself that his uncle should not be molested—and yet Rinehart had been whisked away from under his very nose. . . .

It was not a comforting thought, but he clenched his teeth with the reflection that there were still several more rounds to be fought. That he was a lone hand in this business made his resolution all the keener.

The essential thing was to get back to the hotel. By this time he had reached the Arc de Triomphe, and the first ardour for exercise had left him.

As he stopped, a taxi-cab drifted slowly towards him from the direction of the Champs Elysées. He put up his hand and it stopped.

"Get in—quickly!"

In the shadow of the opposite corner he could see a girl's white face. What fresh trap was this? A second later he tore the door open with a fierce convulsive movement—

"Ann!"

As he slammed the door behind him, and stretched out both arms towards the girl, the taxi-cab shot forward at an amazing pace.

"Ann! What miracle is this?" he exclaimed; "what does it mean?"

The girl's eyes were softly aglow at the excitement in his voice, but after giving his hands a gentle returning pressure, she released them.

"I think I am being followed," was all she said.

Chertsey looked through the back window. Behind, and travelling at tremendous speed along the Avenue Victor Hugo, pounded a long, rakish touring-car.

"There's a touring-car behind—are they in that?"

"Is it a red one?"

She shivered slightly.

"Yes."

"Oh, I ought not to have dragged you into this!"

Chertsey laughed like a man who has come to the end of a long road.

"But, my dear, I had already hailed this cab

with the intention of engaging it! That's why I used the word miracle just now; and as for the gentlemen behind——” He did not complete the sentence, for with what seemed a volcanic swoop, the red roadster drew alongside. The next moment a man, the upper part of whose face was masked, leaped on to the swaying running-board of the taxi-cab.

In his right hand he held a revolver.

THROUGH the slits in the mask the man's eyes gleamed balefully.

"I'll trouble you both to leave this cab and join my friends," he said in a hard, rasping voice.

The appearance of this apparition had been so sensational—the man must have risked his life in making that daring leap from one car to the other—that Chertsey could not immediately collect his thoughts. He had certainly seen the red roadster drawing near, but at the most he had anticipated the taxi-cab being headed off. With his back to the taxi-driver, he could not tell what was happening in front, but, whether through bravado or fear, the man had seemed to have increased his pace instead of slackening it. The fact was encouraging.

"My friends will be most charmed to greet you, Miss Trentham," said the man on the running-board.
"I—"

He got no further. With a lithe spring, Chertsey lunged forward. His left fist landed clean between the gleaming eyes with smashing force, just as the interior of the cab was filled with revolver smoke. Chertsey had a feeling that a red-hot iron had grazed his left shoulder, but an irrepressible sense of elation

was his as he saw the masked man sway uncertainly and then overbalance into the roadway.

"Keep away!" he said sternly to Ann; "don't look!"

He himself sprawled back on the seat. The sight had sickened him—the force of his blow had caused the man to fall beneath the very wheels of the giant roadster. . . . He heard a hoarse, horrible scream, followed by a series of explosive French oaths. But the pursuers had halted in their chase—halted long enough to stop the car and pick up the maimed member of their party.

"What was that dreadful scream?" asked Ann.

He thought it better to tell her. "The man fell in front of his own car—it will give us a chance to get away."

There came no immediate sound of pursuit, and a minute later the taxi-cab rushed into the well-lighted space of the Place de la Concorde. Without slackening speed, it shot up the Rue Royale and into the crowded Boulevard des Capucines. In this hectic maelstrom of night traffic (Chertsey had previously christened the Madeleine "The Assassins' Corner") it seemed impossible for them to be successfully followed, and he turned to the girl with a gesture of profound relief.

"Where can we talk?" he asked. His tone was level, almost matter-of-fact; it appeared to be a commonplace now for him to move amid scenes of murder and violence—and another inevitability that

he should meet Ann Trentham at the most unlikely time and in the most extraordinary place.

"We will go to my hotel—it's in the Rue Caumartin," Ann said, before picking up the speaking tube and giving the driver a few quick instructions. The taxi skidded and swirled in and out of the traffic, suddenly turned to the left past the Café de la Paix, skirted the Opera House, turned sharply to the left again, and a few minutes later stopped with what might have been a snort of triumph outside the modest entrance to a small middle-class hotel.

"This is it," announced Ann.

Chertsey sprang out, a two hundred franc note in his hand. A man who but for his hat might have been a near relation of Josh Twinnell of immortal memory, showed white teeth in an appreciative smile as his passenger thanked him for the courage shown.

"*Mon Dieu!*" he replied; "I showed them what La Belle could do," pointing to his engine. "*Merci, monsieur,*" touching his hat again.

Ann led the way through the hotel entrance to a roomy lounge on the ground floor.

"We will have some coffee, and smoke," she said.

Chertsey pulled out his cigarette-case and passed it to her.

"I think that a quarter of an hour ago I must have become a murderer," he said, "but seeing you, Ann, almost makes me forget it. What are you doing in Paris?—And what, above all, were you

doing riding alone in a taxi-cab away from the Grand Boulevard to-night? Do you remember the promise you made me?"

She reflectively blew a little cloud of smoke.

"I did not make that promise, Gilbert; all I said was that I would be careful. My reason for being here is that I followed Sylvester Lade across the Channel. I am confident that he did not see me himself, but he must have been given the tip; those men to-night were creatures of his; they must have followed me, and hung about whilst I was waiting for you to leave Le Sport.

"You astonishing person! How did you know I went into that club?"

"I saw you," she replied; "you were with an older man."

The words gave Chertsey a painful stab. He rose quickly.

"What's the matter?"

He seated himself again and leaned towards her.

"Ann," he said in a voice that commanded her instant attention, "the first act of this drama you've told me about has commenced. That man you saw me with to-night was my uncle. His name is Washburn Rinehart, and he is the second most important person in America. He disappeared in a perfectly amazing fashion to-night. We were standing side by side in the Baccarat room watching the gambling, but when I turned to speak to him—he was gone! He vanished without a word to me,

and the only clue I could get was from the hall-porter, who said that he saw him on the opposite side of the Avenue Wagram, getting into a taxi-cab, accompanied by a tall man who stooped. The Black Heart includes a tall man who stoops ; his name is Barrington Snell, and I can quite imagine that he is a fitting comrade for that precious pair, Sylvester Lade and Sir Luke Benisty ! ”

“ You say that Washburn Rinehart is your uncle ? ”
The girl’s voice was tense.

“ Yes. You got my letter ? ” As Ann nodded, he continued his explanation : “ the job I mentioned in that letter was an instruction which Benisty gave me himself. I had to come to Paris, put up at the Hotel Charles VII (where a room had already been engaged for me) and make friends with a man who had registered as ‘ James Forbes ’. I need scarcely tell you after this that ‘ James Forbes ’ was my uncle travelling under another name. He had come to Europe, he told me to-night, as a confidential envoy of the President— ”

Ann seized his arm.

“ Whose suggestion was it—going to Le Sport, I mean ? ”

“ That’s the remarkable thing about it,” replied Chertsey ; “ it was my uncle’s own idea that we should go on to that club after dinner, and that I should accompany him. Apparently, it’s a great honour to be invited there, and he seemed very bucked about an invitation he had received from a member, a French Count named René de Guichard.

who was well in, he said, with the American Embassy crowd."

"Did you see de Guichard?"

Chertsey set down his coffee-cup with a jerk.

"I saw him—and I did not like him," he answered; "the man looked the worst kind of French rotter to me."

"He is probably in with Benisty," summed up the girl; "did your uncle give you any hint of his mission?"

"Nothing definite, but I gathered that it was something frightfully important. Wait a minute," he reflected; "he said this: that there was something brewing in Europe in comparison with which the last war would appear a mere picnic-party, and that it depended upon America whether this hell would break loose."

He heard the girl gasp.

"The worst has happened," she said, "your uncle has been trapped, lured to Paris probably by a false message, and is now in the hands of Benisty and his gang of international conspirators. We must discover where he is and if possible rescue him."

All the fears which had been besieging Chertsey since the moment he found his uncle separated from him, were expressed with stark simplicity in the words; and a second painful stab of memory made him rise.

"You remind me of something I have to do, Ann," he said.

She took his extended hand. "Gilbert, I want you now to promise *me* something. I want you to forget that I am merely a girl, and to let me know at once if you get any clue from Benisty. It is certain that he is already in Paris, and the probability is that he will be seeing you very shortly. I shall be staying in this hotel until I hear from you. Will you promise to keep in touch with me?"

In face of the girl's earnestness, Chertsey's better judgment was overcome. "Directly I know anything myself, I promise to let you know."

She walked with him to the entrance and waited on the steps whilst a porter fetched a taxi-cab.

As Chertsey turned to enter the vehicle, she said quietly: "Gilbert, take the greatest care of yourself—I implore you to do so," and then turned swiftly away.

As, ten minutes later, he walked towards the bureau at the Hotel Charles VII, Chertsey prayed that the time he had spent with Ann Trentham might not have made him too late.

"Has Mr. Forbes returned?" he asked the night clerk.

"I have not seen him, monsieur," was the answer.

"Oh, well, then I know where he is," declared Chertsey; "will you please give me the key to his room—I have to fetch something?"

The Clerk hesitated for a moment, took another look at Chertsey and then appeared to cleanse his

mind from remaining doubt. He handed over the key with a little ceremonious bow.

Directly he switched on the light, Chertsey experienced a sensation of nausea. Someone had been there before him! The bedroom was in the wildest confusion.

The first thing he noticed was that a great gash had been cut in the pig-skin kit bag, the contents of which were scattered about the floor. On the carpet, near the kit bag, was the leather despatch case, similarly mutilated. The bed had been stripped and the clothes flung into a corner. Every drawer in the dressing-table had been pulled out, and the wardrobe and writing table had also been ransacked.

After this first preliminary survey, Chertsey's eyes went instinctively to the settee. The three cushions had been hurled from their place and scattered.

He pounced upon the nearest and found it intact. A closer examination did not disclose any slit in the bordered edge. He was equally unsuccessful with the second cushion, and he was in such a state of nerves by the time he picked up the third that he could scarcely grasp the fabric. Then his shaking fingers, exploring the sides, found an opening. In his desperation he gave the cloth a violent tug, and the next moment a cloud of feathers filled the air. Disregarding these, his fingers went searching—and quickly were rewarded by the touch of the oilskin packet he sought. Without troubling to open it, he thrust the packet into the pocket of his dinner jacket. His sense of relief was so profound that he

was forced to steady himself against the wall : Benisty might have won the first trick, but he had trumped his second ace !

Whatever this packet contained, he knew it must not be found on him. Closing the bedroom door, but not locking it, he hurried to his own room. This was undisturbed.

A minute later he was back at the bureau, demanding to see the Manager. Although it was now past midnight, that important personage was found in his private office.

"I have just been up to the room of my friend, Mr. James Forbes," announced Chertsey, and there was no need for him to assume any indignation. "I found it in the wildest disorder ; thieves have apparently broken into it."

The Manager lifted his hands in a gesture of incredulity.

"But that is impossible, monsieur ! This is the Hotel Charles VII ! Thieves. . . ." He smiled as one who humours a lunatic.

"You had better come and see for yourself," replied Chertsey ; "in fact, I insist upon you doing so."

The Manager rose importantly.

"Very well, monsieur, I will."

Five minutes later M. Choiseul was telephoning for the police.

To an inquisitive sergeant de ville, Chertsey gave such replies as he thought desirable, and then retired to his room. By giving the alarm, he had averted,

he hoped, any suspicion which might have been directed against himself. Nothing more could be done that night ; he must wait, as Ann had said, for Benisty to give him a clue.

Washburn Rinehart was undoubtedly in the hands of *The Black Heart*—but he would find him !

S TUDYING the man who had so unexpectedly appeared at the Hotel Charles VII, Chertsey came to the conclusion that he could not be British—he must have a strong foreign element, possibly Oriental.

"I am happy in being able to relieve your fears, Mr. Chertsey," said Sir Luke Benisty. "Forgive me for practising what must have appeared to be a deceit. At the time I gave you your instructions, I had no idea that the person calling himself 'James Forbes' was actually your uncle. You, on your side, were quite unaware, I am sure, that Mr. Washburn Rinehart was a dangerous meddler in European politics—"

"You told me at the time he was a criminal," came the interruption; "your exact words being that Mr. Rinehart was an International malefactor who had set the law at defiance. You also added that I need have no conscience in acting as a decoy towards this man, who had to be removed from his present sphere in the interests of humanity." Watching for the effect the rejoinder would have, the speaker noticed the other gnaw his lower lip.

Sir Luke Benisty quickly recovered, however.

"All that you say is true, my dear Chertsey," he

replied, with perfect poise, "and I would assure you that when I made the statements, I did not go outside the truth. The fact that Mr. Washburn Rinehart has proved to be your uncle is most unfortunate, but he is a dangerous man to be at large in Europe just now. However, if it will ease your mind, I will make you a promise: when your uncle has recovered from his recent accident, I will avert the punishment which the Society of The Black Heart had resolved to mete out to him, on condition that he promises to take the first available boat back to his own country."

The novelist concentrated on the essential fact. "Accident!" he repeated; "has my uncle met with an accident?"

Benisty smiled reassuringly.

"Didn't I say just now that I was happy in being able to relieve your fears? Last night at a late hour, when motoring to my Chateau at Valcluse, which is about twenty miles from Paris, my chauffeur swerved to avoid a dark object lying in the middle of the road. Stopping the car, he got out and discovered that it was the body of a man. It was your uncle, Chertsey, although how he came to be in that position I cannot say. What happened between his leaving you so mysteriously in the gaming-club, Le Sport, and my chauffeur picking him up unconscious from the middle of the lonely road just this side of Valcluse, I am also ignorant, of course."

"Was Mr. Rinehart badly hurt?" Benisty's words, like his smile, Chertsey felt were as false as

hell, but he had to get all the information possible, trusting that some of it at least might be true.

"There was a nasty scalp wound on the back of his head which probably accounted for your uncle's unconsciousness, but beyond that the doctor, whom I called in immediately after arriving at the Chateau, assured me that Mr. Rinehart was in otherwise perfect health. There was some slight concussion, but within a day or so this should disappear."

"If it is convenient to you, I should like to see my uncle. He may prove to be all that you say he is," added Chertsey, "but he has been very kind to me in the past, and I should not like him to feel that I had neglected him."

The answer which Benisty made was surprising.

"I was about to suggest that you should come back with me now," he said, before breaking off at the approach of a waiter.

"You are wanted on the telephone, Sir Luke," the man said.

"You will excuse me for a moment, Chertsey?"

"Certainly." Chertsey was grateful for the interruption. He was more than thankful to be alone for a few precious moments. It was impossible to think clearly and coherently in the presence of this master-schemer.

Although much was wrapt in mystery, one main fact brought him consolation. By some extraordinary means which he had yet to discover, Washburn Rinehart had fallen into the hands of his arch-enemy, but he was not dead. Benisty, no doubt, had him

safely a prisoner, but his uncle was still alive. Everything was not yet lost.

He looked round the beautifully-furnished room, commanding a magnificent view of the Place de la Concorde. Many plots, no doubt, had been hatched in the Hotel Crillon, but surely never a stranger one than this web of International intrigue into which he himself had become enmeshed. If he could only have shouted the truth, what commotion it would have caused to this elegant crowd moving before him !

He had been called to the Hotel Crillon by telephone half an hour before. Once again Sir Luke Benisty had proved himself an early worker, for he was still at breakfast when the summons came. The conversation had been brief, but pointed.

" Is that you, Chertsey ? " asked a voice with which he had become familiar.

" Yes."

" This is Benisty. I am at the Hotel Crillon—come to me here at once." The suave, but authoritative voice had abruptly ceased ; a second later Chertsey had heard the click of the telephone receiver and had felt a burning wave of indignation.

The peremptoriness of the fellow ! But he lost no time in having a taxi-cab called, nevertheless : the life of a man—a man of whom he was very fond and to whom he was related by a blood tie—was possibly at stake. The conviction came that Ann Trentham had been right the night before when she said that

he must wait until Benisty moved, and so early as this, Benisty had moved.

The Chief of The Black Heart had received him with his customary courtesy, but all the while Chertsey had realised that something momentous was shortly to take place. He resolved to continue to meet guile with guile.

"I want you to tell me everything that has happened since your arrival in Paris," were Sir Luke Benisty's first words after shaking hands.

Chertsey replied quickly. He described his surprise at finding that the man with whom he had been ordered to strike up a friendship was none other than his own uncle, and went on to describe the visit to Le Sport and his distress at the subsequent disappearance of Washburn Rinehart.

It was then that Benisty had said he was pleased to be able to relieve his fears.

Fears! In spite of the knowledge that his uncle was still alive, Chertsey had a premonition of impending evil as he saw Benisty returning.

"I am sorry to say I must leave you, Chertsey. I intended to drive you to the Chateau in my car, but some vexatious private business has intervened. No," he continued, "you shall not be deprived of the pleasure of seeing your uncle. You should be able to get to the Gare du Nord in twenty minutes in a taxi-cab, and there is a train for Valcluse at 10.15. The Chateau de Montais, which I am renting, is only a mile from the station, you can walk there quite easily or take a conveyance. The local doctor, who

is in constant attendance on Mr. Rinehart, will receive you."

Chertsey was about to turn away with an expression of thanks when every mental faculty was made taut by a question.

"I have not asked you before, Chertsey, but what has become of your uncle's private effects?"

Chertsey had prepared himself for this.

"I had forgotten to tell you that when I returned to the hotel last night after my uncle's disappearance, I found his room in the wildest confusion. So far as I could tell, nothing was stolen, but his luggage was slashed to pieces, and the contents of his travelling cases strewn about the floor." He regarded the man keenly as he spoke, but Benisty's face was inscrutable.

"Hotel thieves are notoriously daring in Paris," was Benisty's comment, before asking: "Did your uncle hand to you anything of value before he left the hotel last evening?"

Experience was turning Gilbert Chertsey into a somewhat adept liar, and his reply was casualness itself.

"No—nothing," he said.

"I only ask," continued Benisty, "because in a short fit of delirium which Mr. Rinehart suffered after being put to bed last night, he kept repeating something about a certain packet. As, for your sake, I want to do all in my power for your uncle—at least, whilst he is a guest under my roof—I thought I would mention the matter to you in order to relieve, if possible, his anxiety."

"He must have been rambling," replied Chertsey.

"Perhaps." Sir Luke Benisty's face was expressionless.

"Shall I see you again, Sir Luke?"

"I will keep in touch with you," was the answer.

A T seventeen minutes past ten o'clock that morning, a man who was unmistakably English, started to race down a platform of the Gare du Nord after a suburban train, the tail end of which was already receding. The chase was hopeless, and the French porters furiously shrugged their shoulders. The English were undoubtedly a mad race and here was another example of it.

Gilbert Chertsey, stopping his run, swore so loudly that everyone within a dozen yards must have heard him.

"Damn!" he said, explosively, before turning to the nearest porter.

"When is the next train to Valcluse?" he asked.

Upon being told that there was not another one for an hour and twenty minutes, he gave vent to his feelings by a fresh explosive "damn!" and then walked quickly up the platform.

He carried a small handbag, such as a man might use when making a brief visit to a friend's house. After looking at his watch, he walked to la consigne, handed in his bag, and received in return the customary ticket. That done, he turned into a refreshment room and seated himself at the farthest table from the door.

It was not until everyone in the room had left, and he had made sure that he was not observed, that Chertsey pulled out his fountain pen and wrote rapidly a few lines on a sheet of plain paper. This, accompanied by the ticket he had just received for his handbag, he placed inside an especially stout envelope, which he addressed. After drinking the cup of coffee that he had ordered, he left the room, and dropped the envelope into the nearest station pillar box. Then, and only then, was he able to breathe freely.

If so much had not been at issue, he would have laughed at the grotesqueness of his recent actions. But, with his faculties keyed up, he came to the conclusion almost immediately after leaving the Hotel Charles VII, that he was being shadowed. Sir Luke Benisty could not come himself, but he had sent a substitute.

The problem he had to solve, and solve quickly, was what he should do with the oilskin packet? Two facts were abundantly clear to him. The first was that Sir Luke Benisty knew that Washburn Rinehart had had in his possession certain important documents, and the second was that Benisty was suspicious that either Rinehart had passed them to his nephew, or that he (Chertsey) knew where they were to be found. In these circumstances, it was impossible to leave the packet in his room—obviously, directly his back was turned, this room would be systematically searched; in spite of the fact that the Hotel was now being closely watched by the Paris

police. On the other hand, it was exceedingly dangerous for him to be carrying the packet. For all he knew, the story which Benisty had told might be a clever concoction. In any case, he dared not enter the Chateau de Montais with that oilskin case in his possession.

It was just before the taxi-cab had reached the station—and when a quick glance at his watch told him that he only had two minutes in which to catch his train, that the idea flashed into his mind.

He gained confidence by failing to see the man who had jumped into a taxi-cab immediately behind him after leaving the Hotel, but reflected a moment later that there were possibly other trailers within the station itself.

But his mind was made up. It was the best possible plan. He stayed so long buying newspapers that he knew before he started to run that he could not possibly catch the Valcluse train. Then he proceeded to put his idea into operation. What more natural action for a man, who has just lost one train and has eighty minutes to wait for another, to deposit his bag at the cloakroom in the interim?

The letter which Chertsey had dropped into the pillar box was addressed to Ann Trentham at her hotel in the rue du Caumartin—and it contained a railway cloakroom ticket, upon the custody of which depended the safety of Europe.

At 11.34 a man, unmistakably English, came

racing down the suburban platform at the Gare du Nord. He caught the Valcluse train by the barest possible margin.

"*Nom d'une pipe!*" ejaculated the watching porters; "he is doubly mad, that one!"

The running passenger was Gilbert Chertsey, and he did not carry his bag. In the excitement of almost missing his second train, he must have forgotten it.

The Chateau de Montais, even in the clear daylight, was not prepossessing, although majestic. It stood on a lonely height, entirely encircled by a dense belt of trees. All around was a wilderness of ravines and rocks. When night cast its shadows, Chertsey, as he stood looking at the mighty pile of grey stone which the peasant, of whom he had made the inquiry, pointed out to him, could well imagine the scene to be spectral and unnerving. And it was here that his uncle lay a prisoner.

The winding ancient carriage-way was neglected and over-run with weeds. Sir Luke Benisty could not have rented the place for long, or, surely, he would have engaged a small army of gardeners to give the grounds a more presentable appearance.

Arrived outside the massive front entrance, he pulled the bell. A dull, heavy clangling sound disturbed the still air.

A man wearing a footman's livery stood bowing.

"Monsieur Chertsey?" he asked, and when the visitor had nodded, "will you please enter? Doctor Dupont is expecting you."

Dr. Dupont proved to be a short, stoutly-built bourgeois personage, quite palpably impressed with the importance of having been called to the great Chateau.

"My patient," he said in answer to Chertsey's first inquiry, "is better—much better! The effects of the concussion have practically passed away, but M. Rinehart is still unconscious; yet, nevertheless, I am happy to be able to give you the most reassuring report." He smiled with immense self-satisfaction, rubbing his plump hands together.

"Then I may be permitted to see my uncle?"

The doctor bowed again.

"Most assuredly—but I have already said that your uncle is still unconscious. He will not be able to speak to you."

"How long do you expect this unconsciousness to last, doctor?" Many of Chertsey's fears had returned in spite of the reassuring commonplaceness of the medical man.

Dr. Dupont shrugged.

"It is impossible to say," he replied; "we can but wait—and allow beneficent Nature to work her magic. Nature is the indispensable ally of the most gifted physician, Monsieur Chertsey."

"You do not consider my uncle's condition is serious in any way, then? Please understand that I am naturally anxious."

"You may calm your uneasiness, Monsieur Chertsey. I pledge you my professional word that the condition of Monsieur Rinehart is entirely satisfactory."

"Sir Luke Benisty told me this morning that my uncle's only casualty was a wound on the back of the head. Do you know how he sustained this?"

"I regret I do not. This neighbourhood, unfortunately, has been terrorised recently by a gang of footpads, and it is more than likely that your uncle was attacked by them. Beyond that I know nothing."

It was useless to ask the man any more questions. Dupont was either in the pay of Benisty or—what seemed more likely—he was ignorant of the real facts.

"Please take me to my uncle's room," the novelist said.

To all appearances, Washburn Rinehart was sleeping peacefully. The features were composed and his breathing regular.

"You see, monsieur, he is quite happy—although he is not aware of your presence," remarked Dr. Dupont.

"Yes," answered Chertsey, abstractedly; "I wish to thank you, doctor, for all that you have done. I ——" He stopped suddenly; it was as though the unconscious man had heard his voice and recognised it. Washburn Rinehart moved in the bed and his eyes opened and became fixed on his nephew's face.

"Uncle!" cried Chertsey, bending over the bed. He would have been willing to swear that a slight gleam came into Rinehart's eyes, but he received no reply to the exclamation. And yet—it could

not be merely a trick played by his mind—he was positive that his uncle not only knew of his presence—but wished to speak to him. Why was he unable to do so?

He turned swiftly to the doctor.

"I cannot believe that my uncle is quite unconscious," he said; "look, he appears to recognise me!"

"It may be the sub-conscious working of a brain-cell, monsieur," was the answer, "that is all. Monsieur Rinehart is undoubtedly unconscious. If he were normal, do you not think he would speak to you?"

Before Chertsey could reply to this, a knock sounded on the door. A moment later, a man entered the sick-room.

"I trust, Chertsey, that Dr. Dupont has been able to set all your fears at rest concerning your uncle?" asked Sir Luke Benisty.

The novelist conquered himself. It would be fatal to allow Benisty to think that he was in any way suspicious.

"Dr. Dupont has been most kind," parried Chertsey. He would have given everything he possessed to have been able to read what was passing behind Benisty's non-committal eyes.

"Then you can return to Paris with a light heart," was the comment. "I can assure you that directly your uncle is fit to be moved, he shall rejoin you at the Hotel Charles VII. In the meantime, I wish you to return immediately yourself because I have certain

work for you to do. My car is waiting. Permit me. This way, please."

Benisty opened a door on the left and held it for Chertsey to pass through. The novelist's misgivings were many, but he felt that this was no time to give expression to them. Once back in Paris, he would go straight to the American Embassy, and state, without betraying his oath to Benisty, where the injured Washburn Rinehart could be found. And, what was more, he was going to take a hand himself in any subsequent proceedings.

Down a huge winding main staircase which, even at that daylight hour, was peopled with shadows, the two men went. At the bottom, Sir Luke Benisty opened another door.

"This is my workroom," he announced ; "we will have five minutes' talk before you leave. Take that easy chair over there by the table, my dear fellow ; I will join you almost immediately."

Chertsey, after hesitating momentarily, walked across the floor. What were these fresh instructions he was about to be given ?

This huge, book-lined room, smelling fusty from damp and desuetude, was evidently the Chateau library. The vast apartment was chilling even though he wore his overcoat. Looking at the fireless hearth, he shivered.

What was Benisty doing ? Why didn't he come ?

He leaned forward in the leather easy chair and looked towards the door. Sir Luke Benisty had

a hand and arm concealed. He was smiling devilishly.

Too late Chertsey attempted to spring up. There was a harsh, grating sound—and he felt himself falling into space. Still seated in the chair, he sank into what seemed a bottomless pit. The rapidity of his descent threatened to choke his lungs.

Then came a crash that sounded as though the end of the world had come, and after that—oblivion.

M R. WASHBURN RINEHART blinked his eyes several times before he could really assure himself that he was not still in that curious dream-state, from which he had just emerged.

He was in bed—but this was certainly not his room at the Hotel Charles VII. This apartment was smaller, was differently shaped and the furniture was entirely strange.

He had other curious impressions. The first was that he felt very weak—so weak that, although he wished to get out of bed, he felt unable to do so: the effort would be too much. The second impression was that his head must have grown to several times its normal size—and it ached abominably. Rinehart put up a hand and felt a bandage that commenced on his forehead and continued round to the back of his skull.

What the devil——?

And then he remembered: in a succession of vivid scenes the events of the immediate past became unrolled; it was like the experience of watching a film of sensational character.

The following five minutes was an exceedingly unpleasant time for Washburn Rinehart. The first

fact that burst upon his consciousness with stunning force was that he had fallen into the hands of enemies. That false swine, René de Guichard ! He had been the tool employed. When he got away from this place—wherever it was—he would acquaint the American Embassy with the true character of this particular specimen of the French aristocracy.

It was easy to recall everything—painfully easy ! He had been standing by Gilbert's side in the Baccarat room at Le Sport when de Guichard made him a sign. Not wishing to break in upon his nephew's pleasure—no doubt, Gilbert was memorising the dramatic scene for later professional use—he had moved quietly aside.

Away from the throng, de Guichard took his arm.

"Your Ambassador has rung up, Monsieur Rinehart," said the Count ; "he left a message with me ; he wishes to see you immediately at the Embassy."

He had not been suspicious for two very sufficient reasons. The first was that he was hourly expecting a summons from the American Ambassador in Paris, and the second was that he knew de Guichard to be a close friend of Hector Morrison.

"Very well," he had replied ; "it's a nuisance because I was enjoying myself here splendidly. But I must inform my nephew."

M. le Comte raised a hand.

"Permit me to do you that service," he urged. "I will give Monsieur Chertsey any message. And, pardon me, but Monsieur Morrison asked that you should go to him at once."

By this time they had reached the cloakroom and an attendant, at a sign from the Count, had handed Rinehart his overcoat, hat, stick, gloves and white evening scarf.

"That's very good of you," the American replied ; "I don't want to be a spoil-sport and Chertsey is having a thoroughly good time here—thanks to you. My nephew is a novelist and——"

"He is always looking for 'local colour,'" supplied the other, with a flash of white teeth ; "well, he should find it here. Permit me to have a taxi-cab called, monsieur."

The man in bed ground his teeth. What a scoundrel that hound of a Frenchman had proved !

"Will you kindly tell my nephew how sorry I am to have been forced to rush away like this ?" he remembered saying to de Guichard ; "if I am not back here within an hour, I shall return to the hotel."

"I will tell Monsieur Chertsey immediately," had been the reply ; "and, of course, I will make myself responsible for the entertainment of your nephew whilst he remains in the Club."

"I am much obliged," he had answered.

He had not been in the taxi-cab many minutes before he became vaguely uneasy ; the driver was either taking a very roundabout route to the Embassy, or he was going in an entirely different direction.

When he rapped the window to attract his attention, the man, already driving recklessly, increased his mad speed. In a narrow thoroughfare the name of

which he had not recognised, the cab momentarily slowed down, and he had seized the opportunity to open the window.

"What the devil do you mean by not stopping?" he had demanded.

The taxi was now proceeding at a mere snail's pace. The driver not replying to his question, he leaned further out of the window of the cab and endeavoured to touch the man's shoulder.

Before he could do so, however, the door on the other side had opened. The next moment he had felt himself seized violently, from behind, a woollen scarf which smelt atrociously had been thrust over his face and a crashing blow descended on the back of his head.

He had remembered nothing clearly between that and the moment of his recent awakening. There had intervened a peculiar dream-state, in which he had experienced—or imagined?—many curious sensations. One of these was that his nephew, Gilbert Chertsey, had come to see him, that he had recognised him, and had wanted to speak, but was not able to do so.

What the thunder was the meaning of this mystery?

He sat up, but the weakness in his limbs was disturbing. For the present he would be unable to leave this place unassisted.

The door opened, and a man walked towards the bed. Instantly Washburn Rinehart recognised him. This man had been one of the persons playing a part in the dream-state through which he had recently

passed. He was a thin, insignificant, pale shadow of a man.

"I say——" started Rinehart, when the man held up a finger in warning.

"You must not excite yourself, Monsieur Rinehart. You have met with an accident, and are still very ill. It is inadvisable for you to talk."

Rinehart exploded.

"Talk!" he exclaimed; "don't be a fool! I *must* talk! Where am I—and who are you?"

The pale shadow of a man remained imperturbed.

"I am Dr. Thibau, a Paris specialist," he replied; "this is the Chateau de Montais, at Valcluse, twenty miles from Paris. It is owned by M. le Comte René de Guichard."

De Guichard again! But he must keep calm. He was gaining valuable information from this phantom of a man.

"How did I get here?" he asked. "The last thing I remember was being attacked in a narrow street in Paris late last night, when I was on my way to the American Embassy. My friends there—very influential friends they are—will be making inquiries for me." He watched the other closely to see if the words had any effect, but the listener remained as imperturbable as before.

"You were discovered lying unconscious in the middle of the road just outside Valcluse," he answered. "The English gentleman, who is now renting the chateau, was motoring home. He stopped the car and had you brought here. The local doctor was

called in at once, but to be on the safe side, I was summoned by telephone from Paris."

"I must say it was very kind of this gentleman—what's his name?"

"Sir Luke Benisty."

A quiver that was caused by something more than excitement passed through Rinehart. His first impressions had been correct; it was into the hands of an enemy—the most deadly and dangerous man in Europe—that he had fallen.

He looked at the pale face of the self-proclaimed Paris specialist and found himself hating the man.

"How long have I been here?"

"Exactly forty-eight hours. When found, you were suffering from a bad wound on the back of the head. This induced concussion and unconsciousness—but you are making rapid progress."

The patient contented himself with nodding. He was doing some hard thinking and what the other told him was merely a side-issue. The main fact was that this place belonged to the man whose malignant scheming in the underground channels of European politics he had been sent from America to denounce to the Governments of Great Britain and France. And that Benisty, the renegade Englishman, knew his true identity, was proved by this washed-out doctor—if he were a doctor—calling him by his real name.

"Where is Sir Luke Benisty? I should like to thank him." Better a fight with the gloves off than this sparring in the dark.

"I will inform Sir Luke." He bowed and left the room. As the door closed, Rinehart heard a click. He was locked in without a doubt.

With the man gone, he made another effort to get out of bed. A very real fear attacked him as he found that the incomprehensible weakness in his limbs could not be overcome. Forty-eight hours of lying in bed could not of itself account for this peculiar lassitude.

It was useless to waste time in self-revilement. Directly this man Benisty appeared he would demand from him certain things. The first was that he should be placed in instant telephonic touch with his nephew, Gilbert Chertsey. The boy, no doubt, was in a state of distraction owing to his disappearance.

The door opened.

Rinehart, even if he had not guessed his identity, would have been interested in the man who walked into the room. This International plotter bore unmistakable marks of distinction : he had an 'air'. The American envoy noticed that Sir Luke Benisty was tall, immaculately groomed, and that, in spite of his supposed pure British descent, there were traces of an Oriental strain in him. The man's movements alone furnished proof of this ; he glided with an incomparable grace rather than walked. What was more, he was a man who smiled only with his lips and not with his eyes.

Nothing could have been more gracious than the manner in which he spoke.

"I am delighted to hear from Dr. Thibau, the Paris specialist, that you are so much better, my dear Mr. Rinehart," he said; "may I assure you myself that this Chateau and everyone in it is entirely at your service?"

In spite of the caution he knew was necessary, the American's voice was a trifle harsh as he replied.

"If you are Sir Luke Benisty——"—the other bowed—"I am very much indebted to you for your kindness. That doctor-man you call Thibau assures you that I am getting on fine, eh?"

"I am very pleased to say that he gives a most favourable report of your condition, Mr. Rinehart."

"Well, if that's so, I should like to know how he accounts for the fact that, although according to his statement, I have only been laid up for forty-eight hours, I feel so weak that I cannot even get out of bed. I know what I am talking about," he added, truculently, "because I have made three separate attempts and have had to abandon each."

Sir Luke Benisty's face wore an expression of commiseration.

"You need not be alarmed about that, Mr. Rinehart. You may have every confidence in Thibau, who has expressed to me his satisfaction in your condition. I will mention your complaint to him, however."

"Please do. I need scarcely add that I am not anxious to intrude upon your very kind hospitality a moment longer than is necessary."

"I assure you, Mr. Rinehart, it has been a real

pleasure to me to have the opportunity of playing, in however slight a degree, the Good Samaritan."

" Nevertheless, I wish to leave the Chateau at the earliest possible moment. Well, or ill, I must be in Paris as quickly as conveyance can take me. Will you please telephone the Hotel Charles VII and ask for Mr. Gilbert Chertsey? He is my nephew and I wish to speak to him."

His host looked pained.

" I will certainly ring up the Hotel, and you can command me in any other way you please, Mr. Rinehart, but I am quite certain that, in your own interests, Dr. Thibau will not sanction you leaving the Chateau so—shall I say, precipitately? You must remember that those footpads——"

" Footpads? " Rinehart's voice was sharper.

" Who else could have been responsible for your unfortunate condition? When my chauffeur and I picked you up a mile from here along the Valcluse road, at five minutes past twelve the night before last, your clothes were torn and your pockets picked clean. Who else but footpads could have done such a thing? "

" Well, let it go that they were footpads. That doesn't alter my decision to get to Paris with the least possible delay. I am very grateful to you, Sir Luke, but I am also very determined. If this Thibau man doesn't give his sanction, I must dispense with it. And now if you will kindly do that telephoning, I will try once again to get up and dress."

His host bowed.

"I should hate to feel that you remained my guest against your will," he said, coldly, turning to the door.

Directly he was alone, Rinehart made his fourth attempt to get up. He swore in baffled rage upon finding that the strange lassitude of which he had complained still gripped him. Was he paralysed? So much strength had gone from his legs that he could scarcely move them in the bed.

It was an intolerable position, and his face became bathed in perspiration as he realised its true significance. To all intents and purposes he was a prisoner. The whole thing, no doubt, had been subtly planned. If he had listened to Gilbert . . . but the papers were safe, at any rate: at least, they hadn't been on him at the time he was attacked. If Gilbert had any sense, he would immediately put them in a safe place after the remark he had made to him before leaving for Le Sport.

His further reflections were cut short by the return of the man who posed as his host, but was really his gaoler. Benisty was accompanied by the so-called Paris specialist.

"I have put in a telephone call to the Hotel Charles VII," stated Benisty, "and when I get connection, I will inquire for your nephew. I should explain, however, that Mr. Chertsey was not only informed immediately of you being here, but that he actually came to the Chateau yesterday. He was shown into this room by Dr. Dupont, the local medical man,

who has been treating you under the supervision of Dr. Thibau, but as you were still unconscious he was not able to speak to you."

Rinehart frowned. How did Benisty know Gilbert ? He did not like the thought.

" Who informed my nephew ? "

" Le Comte René de Guichard is the owner of this Chateau. I am renting it from him. When you were brought here two nights ago, your identity was revealed by a visiting card—the only thing the thieves had left—and when I rang up de Guichard at his Club for him to recommend a doctor, he told me he was greatly distressed because an American guest of his, a Mr. Washburn Rinehart, had disappeared unaccountably that evening after leaving his Club, Le Sport. De Guichard added that he had received from his friend, the American Ambassador, some time earlier, a message asking for this Mr. Rinehart to go to the Embassy at once. Can you remember," the speaker broke off, " exactly where you were attacked ? "

" Yes," replied Rinehart, curtly ; " so it was de Guichard who informed my nephew. I must thank him for that." He resolved mentally to let his gratitude take an unexpected form.

Benisty remained silent, but Thibau now took the stage.

" Sir Luke has informed me," he said in perfect English, " that you wish to return to Paris immediately."

" I do."

"I regret, that in your present weak condition, I cannot sanction you being moved. Monsieur Chertsey, when he comes, must act upon his own responsibility."

Before Rinehart could reply, Sir Luke Benisty broke in.

"Doctor," he remarked to Thibau, "Mr. Rinehart's bandage has slipped."

"*Pardon!* Permit me, M'sieur." Thibau hurried to the bed.

He re-arranged the bandage, and then felt for the patient's right wrist. "Let me see what your pulse is now, M'sieur."

The grip which the man used was like a steel vice. Helpless to move through his weakness, Rinehart felt his skin punctured by a sharp prick.

An hyperdermic needle! . . . They had drugged him again!

He tried to clasp Thibau by the throat with his free hand, but, with startling rapidity, an overwhelming nausea seized him, and everything swam blackly before his eyes. Like a blown-out candle, consciousness went from him.

ANN TRENTHAM, before she read the note the second time, made sure that the door was securely fastened. Since that attack two nights previously, she had scarcely stirred out of the hotel, and, apart from meals, had stayed mainly in her own room.

She had recognised the writing on the stout envelope instantly—this was the second letter Gilbert Chertsey had sent her—and, feeling positive that it was an important message, she went straight to her room before opening the letter.

Now, with the single sheet of paper tightly held, she looked straight at the opposite wall, whirled out of her immediate surroundings by the words Chertsey had written :

"Ann" (the note ran),

"I am sending you this ticket because I dare not have it on me where I am going. It is a receipt for a small bag which I have deposited at the Consigne at the Gare du Nord. There is an oil-skin packet in the bag, containing papers of the most tremendous importance. L. B. and his crowd must not get these. I am sending you this ticket in case anything should happen to me."

*"In great haste,
"Gilbert"*

Now that the first shock of surprise had passed, she read the lines a third time more calmly. The phraseology was that of a man rendered almost incoherent by anxiety. No address was given, and the handwriting was scarcely legible. Chertsey must have been very mentally disturbed when he wrote.

She placed the commonplace cloakroom ticket away safely in her purse, before deciding what action she should take. The natural thing would be for her merely to keep the thing safe until Chertsey returned to claim it. But a phrase burned itself with vivid relentlessness into her brain: ". . . in case anything should happen to me."

Why had he not told her where he was going? Was it in pursuit of his uncle, the American envoy, Washburn Rinehart? If so, why had he not said so in his letter? Then, looking at the hurried scrawl again, she realised that Chertsey, in his desperate haste, had concentrated on the one important matter—the safe custody of the ticket.

Her mind ran swiftly on. "L. B." was Sir Luke Benisty, of course; and the papers "of tremendous importance" probably dealt with the complex International situation existing in European politics, and concerning, possibly, the giant conspiracy she was out to defeat. She would assuredly see that her enemy did not obtain possession of them.

But, with the resolution, came a haunting dread, a terrible fear: if Chertsey had been observed depositing his bag at the cloakroom, the watcher would immediately report the fact to Benisty, and the

latter with that subtle, scheming, Oriental brain of his, would instantly guess at the truth. It was certain that he would take immediate steps to obtain possession of the bag. It should not be difficult, seeing that he and Sylvester Lade—who was also in Paris—could employ between them some of the most dangerous criminals in the French capital.

She must get that bag herself!

Ann took a very careful survey before she walked across to the Consigne. The big departure station was crowded, as usual, and she might easily be watched; detectives were often interested in people who claimed luggage from railway-station cloakrooms, and crooks shared this taste. It was possible that she might have to run the gauntlet of both, for Benisty, with his freakish mind, had possibly lodged a complaint with the police as well as instructing his creatures.

Yet she had to take the risk, she decided, and, waiting until there was no one near the cloakroom, she walked quickly up to the attendant. The latter took the ticket, which she handed him, and went away in search of the article to be claimed.

"Merci, M'selle," he smiled, as Ann gave him two francs tip.

"Pardon," said a voice behind the girl, "but that bag belongs to me! I dropped the ticket just now, and I saw this lady pick it up. She is a thief!" The man's French was cultured. He was furiously angry.

Ann wheeled. She saw a man dressed in the height of fashion, and who had every appearance of being a gentleman. It was a cunning move—a gendarme would be called, the charge of theft repeated and she would be arrested. The man, in the confusion and excitement, would seize the bag and disappear amongst the crowd.

"You are lying," she retorted; "this bag never belonged to you. You look like a gentleman, but you are a crook!" By this time a crowd had gathered; and, with a Paris crowd's infallible sympathy for a pretty woman, the throng commenced to mutter darkly.

The man refused to be alarmed, however. He looked round, presumably seeking a gendarme.

"I repeat that the bag belongs to me, M'selle," he said; "I regret to have to make a charge against one so charming, but the ticket with which you have just claimed the bag dropped from my pocket-book a few moments ago, and you were seen to pick it up. I do not know what purpose you have in endeavouring to obtain possession of property which does not belong to you, but I must insist upon you handing over that bag immediately."

"Pardon, messieurs and you, mademoiselle," broke in another voice; "I am from the Sureté—Inspector Levaigne. Will you please tell me what is happening here?"

The accuser pointed to Ann Trentham.

"I charge M'selle here with trying to steal that bag which belongs to me."

"And your answer to this serious charge, M'selle?" inquired the Inspector, who had materialised so quickly.

"It is a lie! The bag belongs to me."

"Yet," persisted the police-officer, very gravely, "this is such a serious matter that I am forced to take you into custody." He reached forward and caught the girl's arm.

"*Bien!*" commented the accuser, "I will call at the station later and prefer the charge. In the meantime, Inspector, I am in a great hurry. There is an appointment—of the most urgent nature, you understand?—that I have to keep. Please be kind enough to hand me the bag."

The Sureté Inspector shook his head.

"That is impossible, I regret, Monsieur. The bag must be taken to police headquarters along with M'selle."

The thwarted man attempted to bar the way.

"But this is intolerable! The bag is mine, and I demand again that it be handed over to me!"

"The law must come before your private wishes, I am afraid, M'sieur," was the firm response. "You are at liberty to come to the station now and prefer the charge in person."

For reply the other, his eyes gleaming with rage, lunged forward. His right hand, holding something bright, was uplifted to strike.

Nemesis came swiftly; quicker than the eye could follow, the Inspector had darted under his guard and dealt him a crashing blow on the chin. The man

staggered back as though he had been struck by a hammer.

"Come, M'selle!" said Inspector Levaigne. His tone was so peremptory that the crowd melted before him. It was noticed that in his right hand he carried the small leather bag, over the disputed ownership of which there had been so much commotion.

The Inspector signalled a taxi-cab, and, with his captive, was driven rapidly away.

Ann Trentham turned to face him. There was a flush in her cheeks.

"That was the coolest thing I have ever seen done!" she declared; "are you a magician?"

Napoleon Miles quietly laughed.

"Not guilty, Miss Trentham! There is nothing of the wizard about me. When we get to a quiet place where we don't stand much chance of being interrupted—or overheard—I will explain the mystery. There is a strong possibility of our being followed—our friend behind is rather pertinacious, I am afraid—so, if you will excuse me a moment, I will give the driver some fresh instructions."

It was not until forty minutes had passed, during which time the taxi-cab performed amazing zig-zags, that the vehicle stopped.

"This is the inconspicuous street in Montparnasse, where I am established at present," explained Miles. "I thought it better to stop here than at your hotel. Will you come up to my rooms for a few minutes, Miss Trentham?" The speaker's voice was serious.

When the girl was seated in a small room on the

second floor of this very unpretentious house in the heart of the old *Latin Quartier*, the man who had rescued her with such coolness from an exceedingly awkward situation, proclaimed himself.

"We are allies, Miss Trentham," he said; "and the time has come for me to show my confidence in you. These are my credentials." He handed over a number of papers which Ann studied intently before passing them back.

"I had an idea that you were in the United States Secret Service," she remarked. "As you say, Mr. Miles, we are allies—and I'm glad, because I should not like for you to be—on the other side."

"You mean Sir Luke Benisty and his crowd." Miles' face had not lost its grimness in spite of the compliment he had been paid. "They have gained several important tricks, but, as luck would have it, they just failed to gain the best of all." He pointed to the bag which was on a chair.

Ann nodded.

"Let us exchange confidences," she said. "I am not connected with any official service in England—I am just a free-lance—but, all the same, I have been working on this thing for a long time now, and I have certain valuable information."

"Tell me all you know," urged Miles.

"Sir Luke Benisty is the head of a highly-organised society of crooks, blackmailers and others, which specialises in stealing and selling International Secrets. Benisty has become a millionaire in the process. He has as one of his principal associates in the British

group, Sylvester Lade. Another worker in the same field is a man named Barrington Snell, equally repulsive, but not nearly so important from our point of view.

"The trading in International Secrets started this Organisation which Benisty, perhaps because of a twisted sense of humour, calls The Black Heart, but out of this developed a sinister and gigantic conspiracy——"

"You mean the alliance between Russia and Germany, which had as its purpose the turning of the whole of Europe into a madhouse," supplied her listener.

"Yes. Exactly what will happen if this conspiracy is not squashed, I do not know, but it will certainly mean England being engaged in her greatest war. It is the ruin of his country which is Sir Luke Benisty's ambition: he used to be employed in the British Foreign Office, but was dismissed. That was several years ago, but he has never forgotten. Mr. Miles," anxiously, "what did you mean just now when you said Benisty had won several important tricks?"

He looked at her with a face so grave that inwardly she trembled.

"America was invited to come into this conspiracy, as you have called it, Miss Trentham. There are seven men who practically control Wall Street and the United States money-markets. Four are German Jews, and their sympathies were with the plotters. Two others are wavering. The seventh—Aaron

Gumpter—said ‘No.’ I do not want to frighten you, but I have just had a private cable to the effect that Gumpter was found with a bullet through his heart in his library yesterday morning.”

“Murdered?”

“Undoubtedly.”

Napoleon Miles threw away the cigarette he had been smoking.

“Have you heard of a man named Washburn Rinehart?” he asked.

Ann gave a cry.

“Yes. He is Gilbert Chertsey’s uncle—you remember Gilbert Chertsey?—and he has disappeared!”

“How do you know this?” The speaker’s eyes were like slits of steely flame.

“Mr. Chertsey told me so himself. It was two nights ago. And now——” she stopped, unable to continue.

“Where is Chertsey? I must see him at once.”

“That is what is worrying me,” she confessed. “I don’t know where Gilbert Chertsey is. All I know is what this note contains.” She passed over the sheet of paper. “That came by post this morning,” she added. “I don’t know for certain, but I should say that Mr. Chertsey has got a clue about his uncle, and has gone off in search of it.”

“Which will mean that in all probability he is, like Washburn Rinehart, a prisoner by this time, in the hands of Sir Luke Benisty!” commented

Napoleon Miles. "It was to keep an eye on Rinehart that I crossed to Paris."

"Who is this man Rinehart?" asked Ann.

"The President's closest friend—and the most important man in America!"

"And why did he come to Europe?"

"To warn the Governments of England and France against the very man who now holds him a prisoner!"

Ann gave a convulsive shudder.

"And it is to try and save him that Gilbert Chertsey has left Paris!" she said. "God help him!"

"Yes," echoed Napoleon Miles solemnly, "God help him!"

CHERTSEY, slowly opening his eyes, felt he must be dreaming. What was this place—and how had he got there?

Returning consciousness showed that he was in a kind of cellar. The place was stone-walled, and the cold, damp floor on which he was lying was covered with a foul green deposit.

He sprang up quickly, fresh fear chilling his already numbed blood. In his ears beat a sound which he could only determine was sinister: it was the noise of rushing water, and it was very near. This cellar or dungeon could easily be flooded; perhaps it had been used as the drowning-place of many a poor wretch in days gone by.

Benisty!

That foul swine!—if only he could get his hands upon him for just two minutes! He would not ask longer than that.

Realising how futile such an ambition must be, the novelist started to examine his prison. Now that full consciousness had returned, it was easy for him to remember what had happened—he had sat in a chair in a big upstairs apartment—a barn of a place furnished as a library, which Benisty had said was his workroom—and then, through the agency of

some mechanical device, he had been hurled, chair and all, down what must have been a chute. Ingenious !

The question he wanted answered was what was due to happen now ? Quite evidently Benisty intended to keep him a prisoner—but for what purpose ? Was the arch-conspirator afraid that the disappearance of Washburn Rinehart would compel him (Chertsey) to break his oath and tell the authorities all he knew ? Obviously Benisty did not want him roaming at large again. That was why he had been trapped.

Pacing up and down that foul, flagged floor, Chertsey had spirit enough to laugh. After all, the joke was on his side : he had fooled Benisty !—the oilskin packet, upon the contents of which hung the peace of Europe, could not be taken from him : it was safe ! Ann would realise the seriousness of that letter he had sent her—she would guard the ticket closely. And as for Washburn Rinehart, at least he knew where he was—he was in this very same Chateau ; a prisoner, true, but . . . Chertsey clenched his teeth determinedly ; sooner or later he would get his chance to make a dash at getting away, and when it came, he felt himself pitying anyone who stood in his way.

He looked up. As he had entered this cellar through the roof, there must be the same way out. But although he stood on the partially-wrecked chair, his fingers were not able to touch the dungeon roof—dripping wet, like the floor.

There must be a door. Damn it, he wasn't going to be allowed to starve, he supposed! Yet the only communication with the outside world, so far as he could discover after a close examination, was the small square, barred space serving as a window, high up on the right-hand wall. This was nearly two feet above his reach even when he stood upon the chair.

The conviction that he would never leave that evil-smelling den alive crept over him like a stealthy-footed terror.

"My God!" he cried.

Then he felt his heart give a great leap; either his eyes were playing some trick off on him—or a portion of the wall on the other side of the dungeon was moving!

Yes, there could be no doubt about: a huge stone slab, reaching from the floor to the height of a man, was slowly widening.

What was this? A trick? What did he care? He crouched back, ready to spring. His chance had come to attempt to escape. The blood in his veins commenced to tingle.

When the opening was about a foot wide, a man's body wriggled itself through. Chertsey's staring eyes took in only two facts before he hurled himself forward like a human catapult.

Thibau!

The visitor was that pale rat of a man who, in company with another, had spoken to him on the terrace of the *Café de la Paix* on that momentous night not long ago. Thibau! The swine who had

been the means of his getting into this devil's stew. . . .

That was the first fact his eyes told him. The second had been that the caller was armed: in his right hand was a revolver.

This barked as Chertsey leapt. The novelist felt a red-hot dagger stab him somewhere—was it in the arm?—and then—the fierce, unbridled joy of it!—his fingers were round the man's throat.

The rat squealed, as rats will squeal when cornered, and the sound seemed to Gilbert Chertsey to be the sweetest music he had ever heard. What had happened to him? He was filled with a blood-lust that would have been disgusting and nauseating a month ago—but now he wanted to kill this squealing thing that writhed and twisted beneath his hands. Kill—and kill ruthlessly.

Chertsey had the strength of three men. He knew that the other never had a chance; when Thibau, giving a last animal cry, fell to the filthy floor, the fight, such as it had been, was over. His face the colour of bad putty, this creature of Sir Luke Benisty remained still.

The most gloriously satisfying sensation he had ever known came to Chertsey. He had perhaps killed this man—what did that matter?—and now was free! Free! He had only to slip through that opening, and—

A gasp broke from him. He was still in his prison. The stone slab had closed to again; in the struggle, either his body or Thibau's must have touched

the hidden mechanism, and the barrier had glided back.

God ! the bitter mockery of that moment ! He thought he must go mad ! He clawed at the stone slab until his finger-nails were broken, and the blood gushed from the wounds.

Then he turned to the man at his feet. But Thibau was beyond speaking : all the life had been temporarily squeezed out of him. He sagged like a sack of wheat when Chertsey raised him from that rotting floor.

Yet he must make him speak : that was the only chance. Thibau knew the secret, and he must be made to tell it.

“ Wake up, you swine ! ” he cried, shaking the unconscious man again. So desperate was his need that he did not realise how ludicrous the situation had become.

He was still on his knees, trying to force life back into the man, when a sharp click made him turn. As he did so he realised how he had fooled his one chance away. He should have waited.

Now the slab had opened again—but the second man who had entered was on his back—a whole ton-weight of him it seemed—and he was raining blows upon his head and neck with a murderous weapon that might be the butt-end of a revolver or an iron bar.

The attack had been so sudden, so unexpected, and so silently ferocious that Chertsey was half-stunned before he could rally himself. Then, his

head buzzing as though a thousand bees had made it their hive, he contrived to wriggle from beneath this fresh assailant.

He saw a section of a huge, flabby face, topped by a pair of blazing eyes and finishing in a square black beard.

M. Lefarge had come to see after his comrade !

The man was beastly heavy and inordinately strong in spite of his ungainly girth. Moreover, he had a knife in his right hand, the long blade of which gleamed evilly in that murky light.

Chertsey, remembering the revolver which Thibau had dropped, stooped, feeling for the weapon with a groping right hand.

With a fierce, hoarse cry, Lefarge sprang at him. His left hand was outstretched to grasp, whilst the other was held back ready to give the *coup de grace*.

Desperately Chertsey flung himself upright, and hurled his left fist into that glowering face. The next moment the two bodies were locked in a furious embrace again, swaying and straining this way and that.

The struggle soon proved unequal. Chertsey did not know that blood was pouring from the wound in the left shoulder where he had been shot by Thibau; all he was conscious of was a sudden alarming sensation of weakness—a weakness that was overpowering. In that instant Lefarge must have got his foot behind his right heel, for he tripped ; the novelist was unable to save himself, and he crashed to the floor.

It was all over ! The terrible, ghastly, bitingly

ironic truth flooded through his brain. To die in this cesspool and at the hands of this bearded thug! . . .

Lefarge had him now completely in his power and at his mercy. And the lust to kill blazed from his pig-like slits of eyes. No doubt the man had had his orders; presently—when it was over—he would go upstairs to report to his master. . . .

Ann!

The last vision he had was of the girl's face looking beseechingly, it seemed, at him. Then the relentless pressure of the thick fingers at his throat killed what little life he had left.

"I trust you are feeling a trifle more reasonable now and not quite so bloodthirsty?"

With the mists lifting, with the triple racking agonies in head, throat and shoulder subsiding a little, Chertsey looked into the face of Sir Luke Benisty. The Chief of The Black Heart was sitting on the arm of the partially-ruined chair; he was, as usual, immaculately dressed, and was smoking a cigar. On either side of him was a man wearing a servant's uniform, and each was holding a revolver.

"Afraid to come on your own, cur?" snapped Chertsey. The sight of this man, not only his own arch-enemy, but the arch-enemy of everything which was clean, decent and orderly, filled him with an insensate madness.

The smile on the finely-chiselled, aristocratic face became slightly more ironic; it was the only indication that the man addressed had heard.

" You are a very foolish young man, my dear Chertsey," he replied. He signalled to the two servants, and the armed men left the cellar. Chertsey strained his eyes to see how the mechanism of the moving slab worked, but was deceived by the quickness of the manipulator's hands.

" In case you attempt any further nonsense, Chertsey," the voice of Benisty broke in, " I must warn you that I have a revolver myself."

The novelist did not reply. All the physical strength seemed to have ebbed out of him. His brain was razor-keen, but his body weakness made him sprawl inert. The wound in his shoulder throbbed abominably.

The temptation to hurl taunt after taunt into the calm, mocking face of his enemy was almost overwhelming, but he resisted it. As Benisty had said, he had been a fool: it was time he tried to reap some benefit from his folly. Instead of talking he would listen. Coming to this resolve, he endeavoured to settle himself more comfortably, his back against the festering wall.

Sir Luke Benisty was not long silent. He blew a thin, reflective, admirably-formed smoke-ring from his cigar, and then looked attentively at his prisoner.

" The time has arrived for me to talk of certain things. In the first place, it has become increasingly clear to me that you have played the traitor to my Organisation. This, I need scarcely say, is most distressing. As you were warned at the time you joined The Black Heart what the inevitable penalty

for treachery would be, however, you can have no just cause for complaint. That you will be severely punished is inevitable; even if I myself were inclined to show clemency, others interested in this—er—enterprise, would rule against me."

Waiting, perhaps, for a reply—a reply which was not forthcoming—the speaker continued:

"There is possibly one way—but one way only—in which the Grand Council of The Black Heart may be induced to take a more lenient view of your conduct."

"And that?" interjected the prisoner.

Sir Luke Benisty leaned forward.

"Where is the oilskin packet which you took from the room of Mr. Washburn Rinehart at the Hotel Charles VII?" he asked.

The man was a consummate actor, but now, for once, he was betraying himself. The finely-drawn nostrils were quivering, the hand that held the cigar shook, his whole attitude displayed a consuming anxiety.

Chertsey, in spite of the resolve he had so recently made, smiled.

"Go to Hell!" he said.

Sir Luke Benisty took a long, deep-drawn breath.

"I am, in the normal course of events, a kind-hearted man, Chertsey," he said, "but I would advise you not to try me too far. An ancestor of Le Comte René de Guichard, from whom I am renting the Chateau, was somewhat abnormally-minded. He had a passion for ill-treating any of his peasants who chanced to displease him. A regrettable practice,

of course, but in days gone by these things happened. In the adjoining dungeon is a highly interesting collection of—well, I suppose the correct term would be ‘instruments of torture.’ I trust, Chertsey, you will not force my colleagues of the Grand Council to employ certain of these upon you. From what I have seen—and heard—of them, they are very distasteful implements. It would be infinitely more wise on your part to tell me straightaway where you placed that oilskin packet ? ”

The speaker’s tone was suavity itself, but underlying the words, lurking just behind the courteous manner, like a jungle-beast, was a stealthy menace. Sir Luke Benisty at that moment was a human snake, treacherous, evil, deadly.

“ What do you mean—oilskin packet ? ”

His inquisitor shrugged his shapely shoulders.

“ Since you will persist in being dense, my young friend—a stupid procedure, I may add—I will explain more fully. When your uncle, Mr. Washburn Rinehart, arrived in Paris, he had with him certain papers. These, I have every reason to believe, he carried in an oilskin case.”

“ Indeed ! —and how do you know this ? ”

Sir Luke smiled.

“ I have my means of information. May I proceed ? Thank you. My colleagues and I are rather—indeed, I can go so far as to say we are very anxious to obtain possession of those papers—and we wish you to tell us where they are. I have come for that purpose.”

"Which is the reason I was trapped here and thrown into this cesspool of a cellar, Benisty! Well, you have already had my reply, but in order that you shall fully understand, I'll tell you again—go to Hell!" So much for his resolution: at the sight of that hateful, sneering face, he felt every fibre of his body tingling with rage that seethed and boiled beyond his control.

He was only waiting for a little strength to return, and then—revolver or no revolver—he was going to settle matters once and for all.

Benisty gently shook his fine head. He seemed to experience regret at such language.

"You are not very polite, Chertsey. But we have means, as I have already hinted. And, quite apart from these interesting implements—thumb-screws, pulleys, boots which—but I will not harrow you—and that highly-ingenuous, old-time instrument called euphemistically 'the maiden,' I would remind you that your uncle is in an upstairs room, and has no means of escape."

Gilbert Chertsey slowly, and with infinite agony of body, heaved himself up. Benisty, curious as to what he would do, took his right hand out of his coat-pocket. The revolver which it held twirled idly.

"I admit you hold most of the cards at the moment, Benisty," a level voice answered, "but you can't win—and you know it! Yes, smile your devil's smile, but I repeat: *you know it!* Because if you win in the end, everything which is clean and

sweet and decent in the world at the present time will perish—and, frankly, I cannot believe that. If you win, it will mean that black-hearted traitors like you will triumph over men who believe in their country, and who would die for it if necessary. But you won't win, Benisty," Chertsey went on, his voice rising until the oozing walls flung back the sound, "you haven't the trump card!"

The other threw away the stump of his cigar.

"On the contrary, my dear Chertsey, the trump card is on its way here now!" he replied.

He rose, and gave a sharp whistle. Immediately the stone slab moved aside, admitting the two servants.

"I will leave you to more calm reflection, Chertsey," remarked Sir Luke Benisty.

With three revolvers pointed menacingly at him, Gilbert Chertsey realised the complete helplessness of endeavouring to escape.

CHAPTER XXIII THE VOICE ON THE TELEPHONE

ANN TRENTHAM continued to look at Napoleon Miles.

"What are we to do with this?" she asked, pointing to the small leather bag that Miles had now placed on the table.

"I have a suggestion. It is that we place it in my bank. I would suggest yours only I do not like the idea of you holding the receipt. You have committed yourself irretrievably with Benisty and his crowd, and they are not the sort of people to have any scruples. I should feel much easier in my mind, in fact, if you were entirely out of this affair, Miss Trentham."

She dismissed the suggestion with a slight but emphatic movement of her hand.

"That's impossible," she told him, "impossible, for a good many reasons, one of the chief being that I believe either Sir Luke Benisty or Sylvester Lade, or perhaps both, were responsible for the death of my father. No, Mr. Miles, having gone so far, it is useless to try to prevent me being in at the death." She changed the subject. "Do you think we ought to see what is inside this?" picking up the bag.

"We will give Chertsey another forty-eight hours. If he doesn't turn up within that time, I will take

the bag to the American Embassy and tell them the facts. If it's at all possible, however, I should like to see this thing through on my own. To a certain extent I am responsible for Washburn Rinehart's present position; you see, one of the reasons why I came to England was to keep a more or less unofficial eye upon him."

"He never went to England."

"No. My belief is that some spy—a member of The Black Heart, of course—in Washington, got hold of the President's private code and cabled Rinehart fresh instructions while he was still on the boat. As a consequence of that, Rinehart went direct to Paris without going to London, his original destination. And talking about London, Miss Trentham, are you still quite sure you won't return to England? I understand your point of view, of course, and I admire your spirit—you have given me plenty of opportunity to do that, remember!—but you are likely to be a very important pawn in this game. Do you realise that?"

"Yes—but you cannot persuade me, Mr. Miles, that I should be doing my duty better in London than in Paris."

He briefly nodded.

"Very well: but in view of the tremendous danger which surrounds you—this isn't the time to mince words, Miss Trentham—will you agree to keep to your hotel as much as possible? I want you to leave the active reconnoitring work to me—I am used to it, and, moreover, it comes into my job—"

"And when you get a clue—something to work on?" she asked, eagerly.

"I will let you know immediately."

"And then I shall insist upon accompanying you. Haven't I already told you that I intend to be in at the death? Please remember that I'm not exactly a child," she continued; "I have travelled throughout Europe, and had to penetrate places which were not supposed safe for a woman whilst I collected the first information against The Black Heart."

Miles appraised her radiant charm in a swift, comprehending glance. This girl, but for her striking individuality, looked more like a famous Society beauty than a worker in the dubious world of underground intrigue and crime. Heigho! but Life was full of paradoxes and contradictions.

"I promise you that," he said; "and now I think we had better go to the bank."

She stood up.

"Suppose we were followed here?" she asked.

Miles went to the window which overlooked the narrow street.

"We must take that risk. I don't think it likely because we doubled on our tracks fairly well, but," putting a hand into his coat-pocket, "I have a revolver and I shall not hesitate to shoot if anyone becomes too inquisitive."

As it happened, the journey to the bank, undertaken by taxi-cab, was accomplished without mishap. So far as Napoleon Miles' quick eyes could detect,

moreover, no one appeared to be taking any undue interest in them.

The manager of the important bank off the Grand Boulevard, was most willing to oblige, and Ann and Miles saw the bag deposited in the bank's strong-room before they left.

"Even if another person should present this," extending the receipt, "you are not to deliver up that bag," Miles said to the manager; "in no circumstances whatever is that bag to be surrendered except to myself. Is that understood?"

"Clearly," was the reply.

Both Ann and Nap Miles unconsciously breathed a sigh of relief when they emerged into the daylight.

"That should be safe now from friend Benisty—even if he does try a gigantic bribe," remarked the American.

"Yes," agreed Ann. She would have gone alone to her hotel if Miles had not insisted upon accompanying her the short distance to the Rue Caumartin. In the lounge, filled with English-speaking, matter-of-fact-looking people, they said good-bye.

"You will remember your promise?" were Nap Miles' last words as they shook hands.

"I will wait for your message, Mr. Miles," was the answer; "should I get any clue myself I will leave a note."

"All right—but, please, do not be too anxious to obtain any information yourself; this is essentially a man's job."

"Women have their uses—sometimes," she replied in friendly dismissal.

Alone, Ann went straight to her room. The public rooms of the hotel were overheated, as usual, and the chatter of the occupants badly jarred her nerves just then. It was with an unconquerable feeling of contempt that she regarded her fellow-guests: these prattling, nonsensical women, what hold did they have on real Life? What purpose did even the men fulfil? Suppose she told them of the tremendous events in which she was moving and having her being—they would only stare and think she were mad! Fools!

She was glad to be undisturbed—the solitude and quietness of her own room were wonderfully soothing. Reaction had come, and she wished to be alone; she wanted to think.

Ann Trentham became very much the woman as she sat in that easy-chair, looking dully at the wall before her. She was no longer the reckless spirit who had risked so much High Adventure in pursuit of a purpose that had been the dearest thing in Life to her. She was now just an ordinary girl. Ordinary because, her soul stirred, she was thinking of a man—and at the thought of him her heart throbbed within her breast.

She could not forget that she had been the means of sending Gilbert Chertsey to what might prove his death. Perhaps he was already dead. The vision stabbing her like a sharp sword, she gave a short moan! Oh, God, not that!—anything but that!

He must still be alive!—she must see him again!

Her brain tried to give her the assurance that, even without her intercession, Chertsey would have been dragged into this affair. Hadn't those men, Lefarge and Thibau approached him of their own account? Wasn't Washburn Rinehart his uncle?

Then her heart answered: knowing the terrific dangers attached, she should have used all the means in her power to keep him free from this evil. Instead, she had appealed to the very quality which Gilbert Chertsey, in spite of his innocuous profession, possessed in abundant degree.

Sitting there, communing with her soul, Ann tried to satisfy that furious questioning by replying that after all, Gilbert Chertsey had played and was playing a man's part in this maelstrom into which he had been thrown. If a man's country was in danger, dire danger, as England undoubtedly was now, oughtn't he to take a chance, oughtn't he to risk his life if needs be?

No, not his life! Again, as that horrific vision came, she cried out in protest, putting up her hands to shut out the sight.

She tried to think of the world which would be hers when this Evil had gone, when Benisty and all the rest of that plotting army had passed into the hands of Justice, and Peace should come again. It would be a world of sweet-smelling flowers and quiet, but wonderful joys. Ever since her father's death she had been so obsessed by getting her revenge that

she had spared no time or thought for anything else. Now, if Gilbert Chertsey loved her, as she believed he did, existence would take on a new significance. Life would be jewelled with simple pleasures such as she had never known. They would not want for money—she had heaps and to spare for the both of them.

With a quick revulsion of feeling she was glad now that there was this bond, this tie, between them. It would be a link that would last for the rest of their lives.

If only Gilbert was still alive ! If only he would be spared from the shambles which might start at any moment !

Dead ! She could not think of that—would not think of it. . . .

A knock sounded on the door, causing her to spring up excitedly. Her nerves were getting the mastery of her : she must guard against that.

“*Entrez,*” she called.

A uniformed porter, opening the door, bowed.

“*M’selle is required to speak on the telephone.*”

“*Merci.* I will come at once.”

“*Bien, m’selle.*”

It must be Napoleon Miles, she decided, as she lifted the receiver, but the next instant her heart leapt into her throat. The voice she heard was that of the man she had feared was dead.

“*Is that you, Ann, dear ?*”

“*Yes !—yes ! Tell me, are you all right—quite safe ? I have been so anxious about you—thank*

you for ringing me up now!" What did she care if he read her secret; she was too full of joy.

There came the sound of a pleasant laugh from the other end.

"Yes, darling, I am quite all right—you can stop worrying about me. But, listen, I have wonderful news! I have discovered where my uncle is!"

"Wonderful, indeed! Can you tell me anything else—or is it too dangerous, do you think, over the telephone?"

"Listen, Ann," came the answer. "I dare not say anything more now. But I want you to join me—to-night, will you?" The voice sounded almost hysterically eager.

She replied without stopping to reflect.

"Of course! Where do you wish me to meet you?"

"I want you to get a private car and drive to a village named Menilmont, which is to the north of Paris about twenty miles out. Any driver will know the route. I am staying at a small hotel, Les Fleur de Lys, and I will be waiting for you. I have some more inquiries to make this afternoon and to-night or I would come to fetch you. If you leave your hotel after dinner—say at 8.30—you ought to get here by half-past nine. Darling, I'm dying to see you and to tell you my news!"

"I'll be there at half-past nine, Gilbert." She tried hard to keep her voice steady, but it was very difficult. Still, why should she care? In that eager, boyish tone she had grown to love, he had called her "darling."

" Gilbert."

But no reply came, and she was obliged to hang up the receiver. There were many questions she would have liked to ask him, but no doubt he knew best : it might be dangerous for them to discuss such an important matter as the disappearance and subsequent discovery of an International diplomat over the telephone.

She must tell Napoleon Miles, however ; in doing so, she was merely redeeming the promise she had made. Yet repeated telephone calls to the flat at Montparnasse elicited no reply. Miles, evidently, was busy in the outside world, working on whatever clues he might have been fortunate enough to pick up.

She would leave a note, as arranged ; no doubt Miles would call that night.

Sitting down at once, she explained what had happened. Sealing the envelope, she waited until the last moment before leaving it with the hall-porter at the hotel bureau.

The under-porter, when he heard of her requirements, quickly arranged for a private car to be outside the hotel at eight-thirty ; and, stepping into this, carrying only a small dressing-case, she abandoned herself to a spirit of joyous anticipation. As the miles slipped away beneath the smooth-running wheels of the well-driven car, her feeling of elation increased.

Although the speed of the car was considerable, yet the time seemed interminable. Never once did any doubt assail her : it was Gilbert Chertsey's voice

she had heard over the telephone, and she had complete confidence in the man who had called her "darling."

Suddenly the car pulled up in the dark road with a jerk. She had arrived.

The next moment the doors on either side were flung violently open. A number of men poured in.

The scream which had risen to her lips was stifled by a vile-smelling cloth, reeking of some noxious drug, which was thrown instantly over her head.

She endeavoured to struggle, but it was hopeless.

The last recollection she had was of a man by her side chuckling obscenely as the car moved forward again.

THE wolves who were to ravage Europe, despoil France and ruin England, had met. They were seated in the huge, sparsely-furnished room, fashioned as a library, in the Chateau Montais.

Sir Luke Benisty, the one-time trusted official of British Foreign Office, was their host. He had his assistant his fellow renegade, the over-mannered French aristocrat, M. le Comte René de Guichard. I only knew what unexpected strain of vileness had placed the latter in that gallery—but there he was: mincing, bowing from the waist, excitedly stutulating.

They were a strange company—bizarre and terrible. Baron von Gotze was there. You know Baron von Gotze; at least, you have heard of him—seen his photograph in the World's Press. His square, Prussian's face was then invariably masked in a charming smile. "Pity us—we are stricken. But we have learned our lesson, and shall not offend again." That was what the disarming smile of Baron von Gotze meant to convey. Von Gotze, you will recall, was at Geneva, also at Locarno. At both places he was the mildest-mannered Prussian who ever slit a human throat.

That leader of the world's progress, Zybsco, the so-called Pole, turned Bolshevik mass-murderer, spat noisily. It was a habit he had.

"And this man—this cursed American, Rinehart—doesn't he know too much, eh?" he snarled.

A chorus of approval greeted the words. These men, saturated with slaughter, thought only in terms of blood.

Sir Luke Benisty lifted a hand.

"Mr. Washburn Rinehart certainly knows a great deal—a very great deal," he replied, "but I would remind you, gentlemen, that he is here under our control, and that his information is not likely to be dangerous to us in consequence."

Von Scheidemann turned his monocled eye to the speaker.

"Why did he come to Europe—has he told you that?" he asked in a rasping voice.

Benisty, keeping his temper with admirable restraint, smiled.

"We know why he came to Europe—at least, we can guess. Someone—Gumpter, perhaps—spoke rather too freely of what he knew. As a result, the President sent this Mr. Washburn Rinehart, his most intimate friend, and the 'second most powerful man in America,' as the newspapers are so fond of describing him, to England, with the intention of interviewing my friends of the British Government. You are already aware, gentlemen," with a short but justifiable smile of self-satisfaction, "that Rinehart never went to London. In consequence of

a certain cable message, received before the boat arrived at Southampton, he turned round and came straight on here to Paris—where I had previously made plans for his reception. If any of you would like to see him, he is only three minutes' walk away."

Sobinov leered. So had he leered a thousand times when superintending the good work of the Soviet Cheka. But, while he was leering, the coarse voice of Baron von Gotze broke in.

"Where are his papers? He must have brought papers—documentary proofs. No Government, not even those damned fools, the British, would give him credence on his bare word. Invincible in their conceit, they would merely smile—in the damnably polite way you have yourself, Benisty—and show him the door. Where are this man's papers, I say?"

The man addressed was observed slightly to change colour.

"When he arrived here he had no papers. The room in his hotel had previously been searched, but nothing was found."

Baron von Gotze rose, stamping the floor.

"You're keeping something back, Benisty; there's the proof of it in your face! *Gott in Himmel*, do you think you can fool us? Why, I would tear the life out of your throat with my bare hands—" He started forward, as though to carry out his threat.

Benisty stood his ground. In that moment of

crisis, 'for all his black treachery, he showed his breed.

" You're talking damned rubbish, von Gotze," he replied. " Let me remind you that this affair would not be ready to be launched in a few days' time were it not for me. Mine has been the organisation. If this man Rinehart brought papers to Europe, then all I can say is they are not to be found."

The answer seemed partially to satisfy the angry Prussian for, growling, he resumed his seat.

Petronovitch, an incredibly dirty person with a long, black, snakey beard, through which he ran grimy fingers continuously, threw the cigarette he had been smoking into the fire.

" What does it matter ? " he demanded ; " this man—we can always kill him ! We can kill him before we go. But let us have no more empty talk—now that we are here, we must discuss the final plans."

The chairs of those who hoped to ravage Europe, despoil France, and ruin England, scraped forward.

Washburn Rinehart tossed uneasily in his bonds. God ! if he could only get his hands free so that he might have a chance of escape.

How long had he been imprisoned ? It seemed a lifetime—an eternity of brain-racking anxiety. The wonder was he had not been driven mad.

The whole of Europe was swaying unconsciously on the edge of a tremendous precipice—and he was the only man who could avert the disaster ! Which

was the reason he was in his present predicament, of course.

Why didn't they kill him? They would have to before he would tell them anything. At least, he had the grim satisfaction of knowing that they were puzzled and worried. They knew that he had come to Europe for the purpose of warning the Governments of Great Britain and France against their damnable plotting—but they were uncertain as to what he had done with the proofs which they believed he had brought with him. So much was plain.

He was very weak—they had not only kept him from food, but had injected their devilish drugs—but he seemed to have some recollection of having seen Gilbert Chertsey. This idea persisted, although he told himself that it could scarcely be true. How could Gilbert possibly have found his way there?

He was still puzzling over this problem when the door opened. Four men entered the room. The first, who walked in front, he did not recognise. He was an enormous figure of a man, with a pronounced stoop, and an exaggerated style of dressing. He wore an extremely-waisted coat with peg-top trousers, and a large fob dangled from a waistcoat pocket. The man looked like a grotesque modern reflection of a Georgian dandy.

"Ah! So glad to see you're awake," this person said, approaching the bed. He spoke with a lisp, and in a voice that seemed weighted with all the boredom of the ages. "I've brought someone to

see you, Mr. Rinehart. Please do not allow his condition to distress you."

Washburn Rinehart, looking beyond the speaker, gave a cry of horror: dragged along by two men, one holding either shoulder, was Gilbert Chertsey! The latter looked a physical wreck, as though he was on the verge of a complete breakdown. There were lines in his pale-worn face, which had not been there a few days before, and his eyes held a look of unutterable horror.

"What have you done to him?" demanded Rinehart. "Gilbert—don't you know me?" he called to the stricken man, but the reply he got was a blank stare.

The tall man with the stooped shoulders flicked a silk handkerchief from his breast pocket.

"We have been—perhaps I should explain first of all, however, that I am the secretary of Sir Luke Benisty. Sir Luke at the moment is much concerned with other important matters or he would be here himself. As I was saying, we have been under the painful necessity of applying a slight measure of force to Mr. Chertsey, who is, I believe, your nephew, Mr. Rinehart. He was stupidly obstinate, and—"

"You have tortured him, you swine!"

The other made a gesture of dissent.

"I dislike that word 'tortured': it is so blatant; so crude. As an educated and cultured man, Mr. Rinehart, you will understand my aversion from any word which is in the nature of being crude. You see, I write—essays, *belles lettres*, poems—and—"

"Why have you ill-treated my nephew?" broke in the American.

Barrington Snell, after delicately wiping the tips of his abnormally long fingers, replaced the silk handkerchief in his coat.

"I wish you to understand, Mr. Rinehart, that it was only with the utmost reluctance that we were obliged to resort to—ah, certain measures with your nephew. He, as I have already stated, was obstinate, stupidly so: he refused to state what he had done with certain papers—papers in an oilskin packet, I understand—which were entrusted to his care by you on the evening that you paid your visit to Le Sport."

Rinehart saw the trick immediately. But he quickly answered: "You're barking up the wrong tree, you fool! Mr. Chertsey knew nothing about my papers—he never even saw them! No wonder he did not talk—he had nothing to say!"

The other seemed impressed. He frowned.

"Then it comes back, apparently, to the former situation, Mr. Rinehart," he remarked, in a tone that was full of menace; "you alone know the present whereabouts of the papers—and please do not delude yourself any longer that you will not be forced to tell. What has been done to this fellow here," flicking a contemptuous if weary hand in the direction of Chertsey, "will be a small affair compared to . . . but I will leave you to the anticipation."

He made a sign, and the two warders dragged

Chertsey out of the room. Barrington Snell paused at the door to give the American envoy a ceremonious bow.

Rinehart cursed as he tugged afresh at the bonds which were immovable. Starved, drugged—and now to be tortured! Well, let the devils do their worst: he would die rather than give them any satisfaction.

" **W**ELCOME to the Chateau de Montais, my dear Miss Trentham ! "

She would have known that hated voice anywhere ; moreover, ever since she had awokened from that chloroform-induced sleep, she had been preparing herself to meet Sir Luke Benisty.

The man now stood before her, bowing ironically.

Her head was still swimming, but she managed to stand.

" Having murdered and ruined my father, you now kidnap me. For what object ? "

He looked at her intently. Then, shrugging his shoulders : " Since you know so much, my dear Miss Trentham, why should I attempt to deceive you ? Your father was a traitor to his country ; and, although I did not kill him myself—as you somewhat naively suggest—I admit I caused him to be punished. I considered it to be my duty to do so."

Although she felt herself shaking from head to foot, Ann kept her voice steady.

" I have travelled many thousands of miles, and spent the past eighteen months of my life endeavouring to solve the mystery of my father's death," she said so steadily that the eyes of the listener involun-

tarily flashed her a look of admiration, " and now I have succeeded. If it was not your own hand that killed my father, yours was the mind that conceived and ordered his death. You talk of duty—you, the vilest traitor that ever disgraced the name of 'Englishman.' But Nemesis is waiting for you, Sir Luke Benisty. A short time now, and not only your Black Heart organisation, which exists for trading in International secrets, but this conspiracy to plunge Europe into another war will be exposed and your precious plans blown sky-high ! And, thank God, something of the credit will belong to me ! I have waited and waited—but I can see my revenge rapidly approaching now ! "

This revelation, it was clear to the girl, had evidently startled Benisty, but he pretended not to be affected.

" You are talking melodrama, my dear Miss Trentham—a deplorable thing to do," he commented. " Let us assume for a moment that there is something in the wild statements you have made ; you should not allow it to escape your notice that I happen to hold the cards. Not only is Mr. Washburn Rinehart—I presume, since you claim to so much knowledge, that you are aware who Mr. Washburn Rinehart really is?—in my safe keeping but so is his nephew, Mr. Gilbert Chertsey. My information, my dear Miss Trentham, is to the effect that of late you have allowed yourself to become very much interested in this young man. Naturally, you will be wondering how you were so foolish as to imagine it was the

voice of your—may I go so far as to call him lover?—that spoke to you on the telephone this afternoon? Since I hate to see so charming a creature wrestling with a perplexing suspense, I will tell you my little secret. Amongst my *entourage* here is a man by the name of Lefarge. Included in his many accomplishments is an ability to imitate in the most realistic manner the voice of anyone he selects. I understand his performance this afternoon was particularly good."

"It was clever, Benisty," the girl admitted, "very clever. Yet I do not think it will do you much good."

"No?"

"No. I'll tell you the reason. You spoke just now of holding the cards. You certainly have many trumps, but the most important card of all is held by a stranger—someone quite outside your circle of acquaintances. And you can have this additional information: if Gilbert Chertsey is not back in Paris alive and unhurt within the next twenty-four hours, this man will act. And he has as much power as you, Benisty!"

The man smiled, although the news clearly was not palatable.

"Perhaps you yourself, Miss Trentham, are in the position to supply the information we require," he replied; "believe me, if you can, you would be well advised to do so. Especially in the interests of Mr. Gilbert Chertsey," he added, significantly.

"The only information I propose to give you, you already know." She would not allow him to frighten her.

" That is definite ? "

" It is quite definite."

" Very well. Allow me to say, Miss Trentham, that I think you are a very foolish young woman to speak "—he paused—" to your future husband in that manner."

She was shaken out of her defiant mood.

" What do you mean ? " she demanded, hotly.

Sir Luke Benisty made her a ceremonious bow.

" I had two objects in having you brought to the Chateau, my dear Miss Trentham," he replied. " The first was to ensure that you should do no further harm, or be allowed to interfere with my plans, and the second was that, having long entertained a very warm affection and admiration for your charming self, I proposed to marry you."

Ann looked at him as she might have regarded a snake in a garden-path.

" That is the stupidest possible remark you could have made. Don't you realise that I would rather take my life than allow you to touch me ? "

" Talking of suicide, Miss Trentham," Benisty said, " there are some quite good rocks on the north side of the Chateau. An ancestor of the man from whom I am at present renting the place had rather an ingenious idea : he had a chute fixed up, so that when he wished to get rid of one of his enemies—and he had several—he merely placed the man on the chute and had him propelled into the valley three hundred feet below. Afterwards one of his servants went down and cut the ropes with which the man

was bound, the authorities were informed, and it was given out that yet another unfortunate traveller had met with his death through slipping on the ill-famed rocks at Montais. I only mention this because——”

“ Because you think you can intimidate me with regard to Mr. Chertsey. But you are merely wasting your time.”

“ We shall see,” replied Benisty, going to the door.

A minute later Ann, her reserve strength gone, burst into a paroxysm of weeping.

CHAPTER XXVI**AT THE LAPIN BLANC**

"**S**ERIOUS ? Yes, it's serious—and something more," replied Napoleon Miles ; " but don't lose heart, Bill ; now's the time to bite on the bullet, old son."

" What exactly is the position so far as you understand it ? " asked that harassed-looking Foreign Office official, the Hon. William Summers. " I have been sent over to Paris to make some inquiries because there are some damned funny rumours going about Whitehall."

Napoleon Miles signalled the wine-waiter—they were sitting in the famous Taverne Royale on the Rue Royale—and gave his order. Then he turned to his companion.

" The rumours are nothing compared to the truth, Bill," he answered ; " all the predictions you made at Rimini's that day when we were lurching together, concerning your friend Sir Luke Benisty have been realised. Here's an item of news you can take straight to your people at the Embassy : England's on the eve of the greatest and most terrible war in her history ! "

" Good God ! What are you talking about, man ? " demanded the other.

" I am telling you the straight, simple truth, Bill.

Within the next forty-eight hours anything can happen. The only way in which the disaster can be averted is for us to discover the present headquarters of Benisty—he was in Paris quite recently, and he cannot be very far away now."

"How do you know?"

"I know through people who saw him. Three persons who had either an interest in Benisty or who unfortunately interested this precious swine, have mysteriously disappeared—one of them being a girl! By the way, you know her."

The Hon. Bill put down his glass.

"You don't mean Ann Trentham?—the girl we saw at Rimini's that day? I heard she was doing some Secret Service work on account of her father, and that she suspected Benisty."

"The same. She and I had become allies. She told me definitely she had a reason for trailing Benisty—but now she's vanished from her hotel, and the only clue left proved false. Benisty has got her, of course—but where—*where?* That's the question."

The British Foreign Office official rose.

"I must get away," he said. "The atmosphere of this place is suffocating. I must go to the Embassy. France is being dragged into this thing, I suppose?"

"Yes—she will be in such a position that to keep out will prove impossible."

"All the police and the Secret Service people must be employed—what are *you* going to do?"

Napoleon Miles smiled.

"Get back to your Embassy, Bill—I am going to make a few inquiries on my own."

The two parted at the Place de la Madeleine.

At eleven o'clock that night a man attired as one of the most dangerous types of Paris Apache looked out of a window in a tiny flat at Montparnasse. He gazed long and appreciatively, for the thought came that he might not see this spectacle—fascinating and stimulating as it was—again. With the million lights twinkling, Paris appeared before him as a jewelled garment stretching further than the eye could see.

The watcher took in all the familiar landmarks—the twin towers of Notre Dame, the imposing majesty of the Invalides, the graceful beauty of the Eiffel Tower, the more sombre shadows of the Church of St. Sulpice, and St. Genevieve, whilst, catching the eye almost immediately, was the up-flung black dome of the Pantheon.

Reluctantly the watcher turned away.

An hour later—just as midnight was striking—he was in the quarter of the true Apache, and he had only the trustworthiness of his disguise, and the use he could make of the knife and revolver he carried, to save him from a particularly nasty death: the wolves of Paris' criminal underworld are not partial to strangers. They have a freemasonry of their own which is very jealously guarded.

It was only after much difficulty that the adventurer discovered the place of which he had come in

search. This café, above which flaunted the sign

AU LAPIN BLANC,

was his destination.

It was hidden in the shadows, and had a furtive, sinister appearance which accorded well with its reputation.

Miles, after making sure that his weapons were ready to hand, passed through the entrance and down some cellar steps. He adopted the slouch of the Apache he was impersonating as he walked into a long, crowded room.

Instantly a battery of keen, inquisitive eyes were directed at him. For all his carefully-considered make-up—amongst other things he was wearing a dirty grey sweater buttoned to the chin, and a cloth cap pulled well down over one side of his face—he was a stranger and, therefore, a subject of overt suspicion. Napoleon Miles was used to tight corners, but his heart thumped uneasily as he sat down at an empty table.

This twenty-foot-long cellar was crowded with criminal riff-raff. Agents of the Paris Sûreté would have been extremely interested in the men and women dancing in the centre of the room—had they been courageous enough to penetrate into this den.

Some of those drinking crude alcohol were but boys. These, however, were merely the apprentices—the real craftsmen, the “professors,” were the men lounging against the grimy walls or talking round the small round tables which encircled the

dancing floor. Most of these men were dressed in black, and, beneath the huge peaked caps, the leaden pallor of their vicious faces showed up in striking relief.

The women made up for the sombre dressing of the men by wearing jumpers of every colour in the rainbow—green, scarlet, orange, mauve: these flared vividly in the garish atmosphere.

The conversation at the next table became hushed into a suspicious silence as the newcomer, beckoning a coatless waiter whose shirt sleeves were almost as dirty as his face, ordered a glass of that pale beer which is so popular with the Apache who wisely discards the forbidden absinthe or the almost equally potent cognac.

With every nerve alert, Miles sipped his beer—a vile concoction—and stared moodily at the shifting crowd of dancers. He was determined to stay, although his presence might cause an explosion at any moment.

Before he was aware what had happened, someone had joined him. It was a girl in a flame-coloured sweater, unmistakable in her type and class, and yet possessing a certain illusive, indefinite charm.

"Buy me a drink," she said without preamble.

For answer Miles signed to the grimy-sleeved waiter.

"Brandy," ordered the girl.

Napoleon Miles became acutely conscious that the arrival of this girl at his table had strengthened the original hostility. But he was forced to await events.

" You do not know this place ? " asked the girl, sipping her drink.

" No," he answered, " I come from Menilmontant. They do not seem to like strangers here."

" There was a police-spy—*un mouchard*—here last week. He was dressed as an Apache. They found him out. Of course, he was killed." Blowing a cloud of smoke, she vouchsafed the information.

" That is why they look at you with the eyes so hard and cold, stranger," the girl continued. " But so long as I am with you, they will not dare to do anything ! Come, let us dance. It is the *Chaloupe*."

He realised it would be dangerous to refuse, although he had very little idea of how to dance the famous Apache measure ; all he knew was that the dancers held each other by the throat and swayed sensuously to the music.

The next minute he was out on the floor. The orchestra of two—a guitarist and a violin-player—struck up a fresh tune, and the dance was on.

For a few moments the disguised Secret Service man forgot his worries. His partner was a born dancer, and, being naturally light on his feet, he soon learned the trick. The girl's face was flushed as they went back to their table, followed by a hundred questioning eyes. " We will dance again," she said in compliment.

By some weird chance Miles realised that the recognised queen of that underworld den had become interested in him. This interest might have a sinister

interpretation, of course ; the girl possibly had been sent to spy, and try to learn his business.

When he looked up again, this view was strengthened by seeing three men crossing the floor. Their sullen, lowering expressions warned him, and he would have risen from his seat as they neared the table if the girl had not touched his arm.

"Do not show any fear," she said ; "I am with you."

By this time the foremost of the men had reached the table. He was a brute-beast of a man with a horrible, bloated face, covered with bristles, and a mouth full of broken teeth.

The fellow's coarse lips broke into a snarl as he saw the girl's hand resting on her companion's arm.

"Who is your new friend, Germaine ?" he sneered.

"Find out!" was the snapped answer ; "ask him yourself."

The unshaven brute leered unpleasantly into the face of Miles.

"What are you doing in the Lapin Blanc ?" he questioned.

"Having a drink. Go to hell !" replied Miles in the same *argot*.

At the same moment he rose with the swiftness of a panther. Something had snapped inside him. The vile breath of this man was nauseating. Flinging his body forward, he hit the fellow clean on the jaw with his clenched fist. It was the action of a madman, but he felt he did not care.

The next instant pandemonium broke out. Cries and curses tore the air. There was a rush in his direction.

The Apache who had been struck was lying senseless on the floor; some of those who sought to avenge him stumbled over his body as they ran.

But the man who had been standing on his left drew a knife. With a vile oath he leaped straight at Miles.

There was a bewildering flash of some bright colour. The sound of a shrill, animal-like scream followed—and then a burst of applause that threatened to lift the roof off that reeking cellar.

"I told you I was with you," said the girl Germaine. Looking at her, Napoleon Miles was forced to blink his eyes: she was wiping the blade of a long knife, which was dripping blood, upon the inside of her short skirt. The man who had attacked him was retreating across the room, and someone was already bandaging his right arm.

"You hear! Papa Faucine, the *patron*, is cheering me for what I have done," said Germaine, with the air of a pleased child. "There will be no more trouble. They know now that you are my friend. They will not molest you again."

Strange as was the situation, the girl seemed to have spoken the truth. Not only was he left alone, but Miles noticed that the crowded company appeared to have a new respect for him.

Half an hour passed, and then a great shout went

up. A man standing at the entrance to the dance-room was ironically bowing his acknowledgments.

"*C'est M. le curé!*" announced Germaine, jubilantly clapping her hands.

As Napoleon Miles heard the voice, he stiffened mentally to attention: here was the very man he had come to meet !

A STORM of applause broke out afresh as the man came into the room. These dwellers in the criminal underworld clustered round, giving him a vociferous welcome. Even the dancing stopped. The girl by Napoleon Miles' side emitted a shrill cry.

"Gaudet!" she called.

At the sound the newcomer turned in her direction. Napoleon Miles, seeing him now quite clearly, felt a shudder of repulsion—this man carried sheer wickedness in his face. He bore with him an aura, an atmosphere of unspeakable evil. And the girl Germaine had called him "*M. le curé!*" . . .

The man was now only a yard away from the table, and Germaine had rushed to meet him. It was a horrible spectacle, but Miles mastered his rising gorge.

"This, Pierre, is a new friend—I do not know his name——"

"Bonet—François," supplied Miles.

"And this is"—she burst into a rising tide of laughter—"M. le curé." The title seemed to appeal to the speaker as being irresistibly funny. "But, come, this is an occasion—Pierre here does not often favour us—we must have something to drink."

It was Napoleon Miles who paid for the refreshment. Vile as this newcomer looked, yet he was the very man for whom he was searching the Paris sewers of crime—and he had been fortunate enough to find him without much difficulty.

Gaudet poured a glass of brandy down his throat as though it were water. Then he rose.

"First, a dance, Germaine!" he said.

The girl darted up. Her eyes were blazing. It was sickening, and yet what followed gripped the watcher with an irresistible, if morbid, fascination.

The orchestra of two had started another dance-tune. It was a tango this time, and the throbbing, pulsing strains acted on the *habitués* of the Lapin Blanc like an intoxicating drug.

The dance which Miles saw was not the tango that society drawing-rooms or even the more advanced night-clubs knew; it was purely elemental and primitive, and the dancers abandoned themselves to its wild emotions.

The girl Germaine underwent an astonishing change. Formerly she had been comparatively civilised, but directly Gaudet caught her to him in the first passionate ecstasy of the dance, she became a savage.

It was no wonder that the almost incredible Gaudet had selected her as his partner. The final revelation came when Miles saw her lips pressed tight to those of her partner as, with their bodies bent double, she and the ex-priest flung themselves into a yet quicker movement.

Miles had seen the tango danced in South America and in Spanish ports, where the blood mounts quickly, but he had never witnessed such a scene as this. To give a more macabre touch, the lights constantly changed—now they were green, then white—a mockery of a colour!—and then again a blood-red which made the swaying figures, uttering hoarse, guttural cries and shrill, hysterical screams, look like denizens in the Bottomless Pit.

At last, with a final mad *tempo* of the music, this devil's dance was done. Panting figures leaned against each other in sheer physical and nervous exhaustion before slouching back to their different tables.

"What did you think, my friend?" asked Germaine, with a tantalising grimace.

"It was remarkable!" replied Miles.

Germaine acknowledged the compliment with another grimace, before bursting into a ringing laugh.

"Yet, who would expect a priest to dance the tango?" she said.

Miles endeavoured to look bewildered, and no doubt succeeded.

"An ex-priest, *ma mie*," commented Pierre Gaudet. His voice was hoarse and strained.

The girl laughed again.

"You are a stranger to the Lapin Blanc," looking at Miles, "and so you do not know the story of Pierre. He was a priest—that is why everyone still calls him 'le curé'—but, there was an 'accident' . . . He fell in love—but why go on, my friend?"

Why indeed? Napoleon Miles, hating himself, smirked in hypocritical appreciation.

"Come, talk, Pierre! Why are you so glum? Anyone would think that you were going to the Knife?"

Urged thus by the girl, the ex-priest, who was already half-drunk, plunged into a flood of reminiscence. Man of the world though he was, Napoleon Miles would have risen and left the place, but for a remark which Gaudet made after his fifth brandy.

"And there is another job for me to-morrow night," he boasted. "I who am now in unholy orders, have to go to a certain nobleman's chateau, there to perform a pleasing ceremony for an English *milord*."

"You are to perform a marriage ceremony—is that it?" questioned the girl Germaine.

"Assuredly!" smirked the ex-priest. "It will not be strictly legal, you understand—but what of that?"

"And this English *milord*—he will pay you well?" asked Napoleon Miles. His tone, admirably controlled as it was, must have reflected something, for Gaudet regarded him suspiciously.

"I don't know you," he said, with a foul, blistering oath; "keep your questions to yourself!"

"Sacred name of a dog!" expostulated Germaine. "Have I not already answered for François here? Of what are you afraid?"

Gaudet emptied his glass.

"I was not to talk," he said, "and here I am talking . . ."

Napoleon Miles leaned across the small table.

"I have no wish to know your business, my friend," he said; "that class of thing does not appeal to me. I would rather stick a knife in a police-agent's throat —that is more in my line. But the night is young —and there is plenty left to drink!"

Under the soothing influence of more raw brandy, Pierre Gaudet mellowed to such an extent that he forgot his suspicions. An hour later he and François Bonet left the café together.

SLOWLY Chertsey returned to consciousness. The horrors of the past few hours had made him long for death, but the instinctive desire to live reasserted itself as his eyes took in the familiar sight of his prison.

They must have flung him back into the cellar like a sack of coal after that damnable torture, for he lay sprawled upon the floor.

How much had he told? Not much, he was convinced, for it had been a case of his will against Benisty's, and he had resolved to hold out.

He recalled reading once how much it took to kill a man, and, fired afresh with the desire to live, he felt new strength returning to him every minute. The swine would still have him to reckon with—by God!—if he only had one real chance—

A faint click caused his brain to be on the alert. Caution told him to remain still, to feign unconsciousness.

A part of the cellar wall, only a foot or so from his head, commenced to move—to open—

Through this aperture glided a man. Chertsey, looking with half-closed eyes, saw that it was one of the chateau servants. The fellow held a revolver

and looked round cautiously. What his object was in coming to the cellar was not plain—perhaps he had been sent to ascertain if the prisoner was really dead. But when he saw the still form on the floor, he relaxed a good deal of his caution.

"They've killed him!" Chertsey heard him mutter, and then the hireling, as though to make sure, stepped further away from the opening and into the cellar.

The next moment the man was bending over him.

He had to act quickly, and he dared not fail. Remembering a trick that was prevalent when he was a boy at school, he shifted uneasily as though in pain, and then drove his clenched fist into the hollow at the back of the man's left knee.

The result of this schoolboy's ruse was entirely successful: taken unawares, the man pitched forward, and his foot stumbling against Chertsey's body, he fell headlong.

Instantly the novelist attacked him, pressing a knee into the man's back and getting a grip on his throat. His desperate need made him ruthless—and he remembered what he had suffered from Lefarge.

The man squealed and struggled, but most of his courage had been knocked out of him by the suddenness of the attack, and it was not long before he lay still.

The first thing Chertsey did was to secure the

revolver which had dropped from the man's hand. With this held ready for use, he slipped through the opening, and, noticing the lever which controlled the mechanism, closed it carefully behind him.

He found himself in a long and broad stone corridor, smelling dank and stagnant. What a place to imprison a man!

It was almost impossible to credit that he was really free of that pest-house, and he stopped for a few moments to allow the truth to flood through him. When he moved forward he had two resolves. The first was to reach Washburn Rinehart, and the second to sell his life after that as dearly as possible. There were six bullets in that revolver, and he guaranteed that each of these should find a proper home.

But first he had to get into touch with his uncle. He might wait in that chilling corridor and kill six men with a little luck ; but that, apart from satisfying his burning sense of personal vengeance, would serve no useful purpose ; ultimately it was inevitable that he would be re-captured.

Imprisoned in that cellar, he had not been able to count the passing of time, but he knew that every minute was valuable. The enemy must be pushing forward their plans, and any moment the blow which was to convulse Europe and turn it into a gigantic shambles might fall.

At the other end of the corridor was a small winding stone staircase. Waiting for a few moments, but being reassured by the deep silence, Chertsey

commenced his journey into the enemy's lines. He expected every second to hear the thud of footsteps, but the stillness was so intense that the whole chateau might have been deserted.

Reaching the top of the staircase, his questing eyes saw a labyrinth of passages. By the close, fusty smell which prevailed, he guessed he was still underground.

He stopped again. There were a dozen ways he could take—and each one might lead him into irretrievable danger. Nevertheless, he had to go on.

Acting on impulse, he turned to the left. A moment later, he could have shouted: at the end of this passage was a massive staircase leading upwards. Gripped by an exulting excitement, he started to climb.

Barrington Snell sidled into the presence of the man who owned him body and soul.

"He still refuses to talk," he said.

Sir Luke Benisty looked up from some documents he was examining.

"I am very much afraid this Rinehart person will have cause to regret his obstinacy," he remarked; "send Thibau to me, will you?"

Ten minutes later Benisty and the pale shadow of a satellite whom he had described as a Paris specialist, stood looking down at the American envoy.

"I am reluctant to disturb you again, Mr. Rinehart, but the truth is, time presses. Moreover, I am not

concerned alone in this matter ; those who work with me have given their vote and I am obliged to carry out their wishes."

The man bound to the bed glared.

" What the devil do you want now ? " he demanded ; " let me tell you once again, Benisty, that every minute you keep me here against my will, so does your own peril increase. The Secret Services of Great Britain and France will be combing Paris for me."

Sir Luke Benisty politely stifled what might have been a yawn.

" Permit me to remind you once again, my dear Rinehart, that this is not Paris. In this chateau, fringing a great forest and situated in a particularly inaccessible region, you are as remote from Paris, where certainly a search may be proceeding for you, as though you were in the wilds of Newfoundland or Canada. But enough : as I have already said, time presses ; and I did not come here to bandy words."

The bound man continued to glower, but he made no further comment.

" What you are requested to do, Mr. Rinehart,"—the voice, silky before, was now almost a snarl—" is this. We want a full and detailed account of the exact reason why you came to Europe ; together with full data of the proofs you brought. The papers in the now notorious oilskin packet not being forthcoming, you will have to rely upon your memory. Be careful that does not fail you—for, by God, if it

happens to do so in the slightest degree, you will suffer for the lapse."

The answer came in a choking gasp.

" You will get nothing from me, Benisty. You have tortured my nephew, and perhaps by this time have killed him, but I can tell from your manner that he has not talked. Like me, he recognises that countries come before men in a crisis like this—do your worst, you dog, and be damned to you ! "

It was a courageous speech for a man of late middle-age, desperately weak through want of food, lack of sleep and previous torturings, to make, and Benisty recognised it. But time pressed, and he had received his definite and very explicit orders from the Germans and Russians who ruled over him. . . .

He signed to Thibau, who came quietly to his side.

" This man," he told Rinehart solemnly, indicating the pale shadow, " has studied the human anatomy ; he used to be an assistant to a famous Paris nerve specialist. He knows a great deal about pain—how much the human system can stand, for instance—and *how to inflict it*. For the last time, Rinehart, I give you your chance. Refuse, and—"

" I do refuse ! "

" You are very foolish. Now it is just a question of time. I have a notebook here, and in it I shall write the answers you will give me to various questions. Thibau"

But before the slinking, pallid-faced torturer could

apply his fiendish persuasion, a man burst violently into the room. It was Sabinov. The Russian carried a paper in his hand, and was almost distraught with passion.

"Leave this fool now, Benisty!" he cried. "I want to see you on a vital matter."

The wild light which had been in Sir Luke Benisty's eyes died down. He made a sign to Thibau, who slipped away. A minute later, Washburn Rinehart was alone: Benisty had followed Sabinov out of the room.

The American groaned—and then remained still. The door was opening quietly and cautiously. A man who looked merely the ghost of his former self came noiselessly to the side of the bed.

"Gilbert!"

"Hush!" came the warning reply; "they had me locked in a filthy cellar and I have only just managed to escape. Uncle, I'm going to get help—I'm going to get you away."

Rinehart answered quickly.

"I do not matter, boy—what does matter is preventing the hell which these devils are brewing from breaking loose. Where is that oilskin packet? Safe, I hope? You didn't have it on you?"

"Don't worry about that, uncle: it's safe."

"You must send a message to the American Embassy, Gilbert."

"Yes—but how?"

Washburn Rinehart's worn face reflected his eagerness.

"They have wireless near here. I have often heard messages being sent. Seems to come from this direction," glancing to the left. "Wish I could tell you exactly where it is—"

"Don't worry; I'll find it."

"You must not be caught here!" hoarsely whispered Rinehart, in a sudden frenzy of apprehension. "Do you know anything about wireless?—how to send a message, I mean?"

"Yes, thank the Lord! Last year I thought of writing a wireless novel, and I studied the whole business pretty thoroughly. Had a course of special instruction. Look here, what shall I say?"

"Bend down: I'll tell you the code words."

It was a tense situation. But both forgot the chance of being interrupted in the urgency of the moment.

"Repeat what I have said!" said Washburn Rinehart; and when his nephew had done so, he added the one word: "Good!"

"Uncle," said Chertsey, as he rose to go, "I am leaving you this revolver. If the worst comes to the worst—" He stopped, before continuing: "Directly I have sent off that wireless message I intend to leave the chateau somehow or other so that I can get help. But if I don't succeed—" Again he paused.

"I understand, my boy. But what about yourself?"

"I have another gun," lied Chertsey.

Half way to the door he stopped.

"What a fool!" he said. "I forgot you could not use your hands." He rapidly untied the rope which bound Rinehart's hands and arms. "If they come in, kid them that you are still helpless," he went on; "hide the gun beneath the clothes."

"Good-bye, Gilbert."

The novelist bent down and touched the speaker's forehead with his lips.

"I'll do my best, old chap," he promised.

Once outside he turned quickly to the left. So far as he had been able to ascertain from observations made during his long climb upwards, he was now in one of the turret towers of the chateau. Walking down the passage, which was flanked on either side by many doors, he heard faintly the unmistakable sounds of "wireless." That crackling noise fired him with a wonderful buoyancy.

He located the door, and quietly opened it. The man with his back to him was so absorbed with his instrument that Chertsey was inside the room before the operator was aware of the intrusion.

The fellow jumped up quickly, his hand groping for the revolver which lay on the small table to his right.

The man's fingers never closed on the weapon, for with a silent but deadly spring, Chertsey leapt. Before the cry which welled to the other's lips could be given utterance, the novelist's fingers, used by this time to such work, closed round the man's throat.

Two minutes later the wireless operator lay an inert mass on the floor.

Chertsey's first task was to lock the door, and then, marvelling at his self-possession, he commenced to strip the uniform from the unconscious man who was wearing the same livery as the chateau servants. He was reluctant to spare even these few minutes, but he had the satisfaction of knowing that the door he had locked was stoutly made and likely to resist any attack for some considerable time.

Before seating himself at the instrument, he looked round the room. There was a large curtained recess in the far corner, and to this he dragged the body of the operator whose upper clothes he was now wearing. By the side of the unconscious man he laid his own clothes which by now had become thoroughly disreputable.

The curtains re-drawn across the recess, he rushed to the instrument. Hesitating for a moment to recall the words of the private code, he then sent the message, which was destined to save Europe from a ghastly fate, into the ether.

Half way through the message, he started convulsively. Someone was hammering on the door. To hell with them—whatever it was! He continued at his task.

That done, he decided on a bold strategy. The only way out of that room was through the door—and that was the route he intended to take! Turning the key in the lock, he flung the door suddenly open. A man whose face was livid rushed in. He was

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cursing fluently in a foreign tongue, but apart from this was not a pleasant sight.

"Why did you not open?" he demanded, fiercely.

Standing sideways to the door, Chertsey swiftly backed, pulling the door hard after him. The key which he had been holding in his right hand was inserted in the lock, turned and then withdrawn. The next moment he was racing down the passage, the furious cursing of the imprisoned man lending him speed.

A caution born out of the terrible responsibility that rested upon him made him slacken into a normal walk as he turned the corridor. The journey to the outside world was fraught with sufficient danger without drawing unnecessary attention to himself. Unless he met Benisty or one of his intimates, his servant's uniform should allay any open or casual suspicion.

Descending the first flight of a noble staircase, he noticed a tray holding glasses standing on a small table outside a room from which issued the sound of voices. That tray might be valuable camouflage. Picking it up, he proceeded down the winding stairway.

He had descended two more flights when, turning a corner, he found himself confronted by a paunchy person who was possibly a butler. This man blazed away at him in voluble French. The only part of the tirade that the novelist could understand was why he, the nameless son of a nameless mother,

hadn't used the service stairs. His face averted as much as possible, Chertsey walked on with a muttered "*pardon!*"

A hand fell heavily on his shoulder.

" You're not Guillaume!—who in the name of ten thousand devils are you? " The inquisitor's voice was strained by suspicion.

Chertsey felt it was useless to reply in words. There was not time for that. Besides, he realised that any verbal answer was sure to be unsatisfactory : his questioner, who must be the major-domo of the chateau, had thought at first that he was on the household staff, but had now been undeceived.

Chertsey's left knee shot upwards. It met the butler's stomach with agonising impact. The man's hand released its hold on the novelist's shoulder and Chertsey, in turn, released his grip on the tray, which fell with a crash to the stone floor.

He could not afford to walk any longer : he had to run ! And, with the outraged butler shrieking behind him, he took to his heels. The situation might have been comical in any other circumstances.

Taking the remaining stairs three at a time, Chertsey knocked aside a man who tried to detain him, and made straight for an open door. Darkness had already come, but through that door he knew lay Freedom.

He emerged into a circular space. At some little distance away stood a long, lean motor-car, whose engine evidently possessed tremendous power.

A car! With that he could reach Paris. . . .

A man wearing chauffeur's uniform came running towards him, but he swerved like a Rugby footballer, reached the door of the giant roadster and flung himself into the driver's seat.

A series of verbal explosions from the chauffeur mingled with the roar of the engine as Chertsey unleashed its power.

The car shot forward like a grey thunderbolt. Narrowly escaping a collision with one of the great stone pillars at the end of the drive, the escaping man took the corner on the rims of two wheels, and, with a challenging roar, sped into the narrow road.

Chertsey had travelled perhaps ten miles before it occurred to him that he might be going away from Paris instead of approaching the Capital. Pre-occupied, he failed to notice a warning horn-blast that came from the left of a network of cross-roads.

The next moment a red-coloured monster tore into the side of the purloined car; he felt himself lifted high above the deafening crash of the impact, and then everything was blotted out.

Sir William Bagot, British Ambassador at Paris, looked across the big mahogany table at the group of grave-faced listeners.

"We must find these men," he said, impressively. "It is not too much to add that the lives of millions depend on our finding them—and finding them soon."

Thank God, we can avert the greater mischief—the possibility of our being taken entirely by surprise—but who knows what further devilry these people may be brewing? And there is the fate of Mr. Washburn Rinehart to be considered. Gentlemen, we must act promptly."

M. Paul Lenoir, the Chief of the French Secret Service, threw up his hand in a gesture of despair, peculiarly Gallic.

"Have we not done everything possible, Sir William?" he asked; "Paris has been combed—but there is no trace of any of these men. Perhaps they are all out of the country by this time."

The important representative from the American Embassy sprang from his chair.

"Rinehart must be found! The President is raising all kinds of Hell with us," he declaimed

"And when we find Mr. Rinehart, we shall find the keys to all the remaining puzzles," replied Sir William Bagot.

M. Paul Lenoir gesticulated animatedly.

"One cannot discover what is not there," he declared. From his manner he might have been meeting a charge of incompetence.

Without ceremony the door burst open and a man rushed into the room. He was wild-eyed with excitement. It was the Hon. William Summers.

"I know where the swine are to be found, sir!" he cried, looking at Sir William Bagot. "I've just come from the American Embassy. They've received a mysterious wireless message."

The British Ambassador did not forget his early training as a diplomat.

"Sit down, Summers," he remarked, quietly, "and explain what you mean."

The Hon. Bill remained standing as he burst into a fresh flood of excited talk.

FOR perhaps the fortieth time, Ann looked round her prison. This was a small room, perched high up. So much she was able to see out of the one barred window. To the left stretched a dense forest, to the right the cliffs of sinister memory which Benisty had mentioned.

And somewhere in this same Chateau was Gilbert Chertsey awaiting a fate so horrible that it revolted the mind.

She considered the question : Could she by any sacrifice save Chertsey's life ? No doubt Benisty would listen—or pretend to listen—but he would be bound to be faithless to his bargain. He was that type.

The only chance rested with Napoleon Miles. Had he gone to the Hotel in the Rue Caumartin as arranged? And had he been given her note ? If by any chance that note had miscarried or fallen into the wrong hands, then all hope was gone. With so much at stake, Benisty would be entirely ruthless.

The thought brought a memory back to her—a recollection so grotesque and yet so revolting that she felt her heart stop beating for a second.

What was it Benisty had said ? He had had her brought to the Chateau to marry her ! . . . At the

time she had thought little of it—the notion was so impossibly fantastic that she could not take it seriously. And then her indignation had kept her courage up to boiling point. But now, there was a locked door, a barred window and a strongly-defined sense of approaching disaster to keep her blood chilled.

It was this waiting which was so numbing, so nerve-wracking. She must have been in the Chateau for nearly twenty hours, for darkness was now brushing the outside world with its wings. Food and drink had been brought her, but she had scarcely touched either. Rather than be under any obligation to that man she would starve.

For all her youth and beauty she was used to disappointment, but the supreme irony of this hour gibed at her remorselessly. She had solved the mystery of her father's death only to know that the information would be turned not against the man she had sworn to bring to justice, but against herself—and the man she loved! For his own self-protection Benisty would not allow either of them to go.

They would all die together—Gilbert Chertsey, Washburn Rinehart and herself. But, no, she would not die; she would not be allowed to share the others' fate. Benisty was going to marry her. . . . The fact stabbed her relentlessly a second time.

This suspense was unendurable. It would drive her mad. If only she could *know* something. . . .

As though Fate had decided to answer her appeal, the door opened. Sir Luke Benisty and

a pale, insignificant, slinking shadow of a man entered.

Benisty was dressed as though for a wedding.
“ You will wait outside, Thibau,” he said to his companion.

“ So now you know the reason of my call,” said Sir Luke Benisty, ten minutes later. “ I regret not being able to give you more notice, but events have occurred with somewhat startling rapidity in the Chateau to-night.”

“ They will occur with even more rapidity during the next few hours,” Ann replied. She had only her unconquerable faith to go upon, but she would stand up to Benisty so long as she had the strength.

“ What do you mean by that ? ” The words had gone home. Looking at him intently, Ann thought she saw a change, well-concealed and yet unmistakable. Something had shaken the man. He was trying hard to hide it, but even his usual incomparable *aplomb* was not sufficient disguise.

“ Mean ? ” she repeated. “ What should I mean but that the arrest of you and your abominable fellow-criminals is now merely a question of time ? Didn’t I warn you to this effect yesterday ? Since then the French police and the British Authorities will have been able to effect their plans.”

She kept her voice steady, her expression brave, praying that Benisty would not realise she was merely bluffing.

“ All this is very intriguing, my dear Miss Trentham,”

was the comment, "but I would suggest that as you are shortly to be joined to my unworthy self in the holy bonds of matrimony, you should endeavour to cultivate a more amiable view of your future husband."

She faced him resolutely.

"Yesterday I told you I would rather kill myself than allow you to come near me."

"Sheer, hysterical nonsense, my dear! But, of course, you are not yourself; you can scarcely realise what you are saying. Listen, please," he went on, as she was about to voice her further indignant contempt, "I have very little time to spare. Apart entirely from your nonsensical threats—which, of course, are based upon fallacy—the time is rapidly approaching when this highly interesting house party must be broken up. The campaign which is to change the whole face of Europe, has been planned to the last detail and now the General Staff must separate.

"Unlike the others, I intend to take no further part. I have had an active life, and now I propose to rest, idling my time away in the sunshine of some cosmopolitan clime and in the smiles of the most beautiful woman I have ever seen." He bowed to her before continuing, and Ann, aghast at his effrontery, for the moment could find no words.

"I have communicated my wish to my principals in this affair, and they have signified their approval. They recognise, I am glad to say, the important part I have played in the present proceedings, and—not to put too fine a point on it—I am now a rich man——"

"Rich with blood money——!"

"Come, come! That is not the way in which to treat your future husband. I have stood a good deal from you, my dear, but I warn you that I have my limit."

"Limit! You talk to me of a 'limit!'" The anger which she had endeavoured to check, overflowed. "You—my father's murderer—stand there calmly proposing that I shall marry you! I warn you now, Benisty, that should the help I am expecting come too late, I shall take the first opportunity to kill you!"

"I admire your spirit," he told her. "It is so rarely nowadays that one meets a woman with any real spirit. I confess, my darling Ann, you add enormously to your appeal by displaying so much delightful animation."

Swiftly his bantering mood changed. The natural devil now showed in his eyes and face.

"Thibau!" he called.

Ann sprang forward as the door opened. But Benisty as though anticipating the action, seized her round the waist.

She fought with the determination of a desperate woman, but it was a case of two men against a girl, and the struggle was too unequal to last long. Ann felt something sharp prick her arm, and the power to resist died away.

"How are you feeling now?"

The voice was undoubtedly that of an Englishman. Chertsey, looking up at the speaker, experienced a

feeling of hope that was almost suffocating. Whoever the man might prove to be, he travelled with a big party—there were about a dozen other men standing about—and *he was British!*

" You crashed into my car—was that it ? " he asked.

" Yes. I'm most awfully sorry. But I am afraid you didn't sound your horn, old chap, and I was in a devil of a hurry."

" So was I. It was my fault entirely. Look here," with a sudden impulse, " do you mind telling me who you are ? "

The other looked at him keenly.

" Any particular reason why you should know ? "

Chertsey sprang up. He might have been killed, but the miracle was that apart from a throbbing in his head, he felt none the worse for the collision.

" My God, I have ! " he said. " I've just escaped from a Chateau a few miles away from here. There is a hellish plot against the safety of England and France being hatched there."

The listener seized his arm.

" Is your name Chertsey ? " he demanded.

" Yes—but how did you guess ? I had to pinch these clothes off a servant in order to get away."

The other's excitement increased.

" A fellow named Napoleon Miles—an American Secret Service man—has mentioned your name to me." He paused. " Then it was you who sent the wireless warning in code to the American Embassy ! By Jove, Chertsey, I'm damned glad to meet you !

My name's Summers. I'm of the British Foreign Office."

"I was almost beginning to think that Providence had stopped working," replied the novelist. "Where were you going with these men? Who are they?"

The Hon. Bill Summers caught him by the shoulder.

"We were on our way to the Chateau de Montais," he said. "These chaps are French and British Secret Service Johnnies," he said. "I have been placed in charge of them and given definite instructions to get into the place and arrest everyone inside. If you were trekking to Paris for help, you needn't go any further. It's here: join the storming party!"

As Chertsey got into the speaker's car—the purloined roadster was more or less a wreck—he felt that he had received a Sign from Heaven.

BACK at the Chateau de Montais, a heated conference was being held. Slobinov, the Russian, who had not yet recovered from his enforced sojourn in the wireless-room, was very animated in his criticisms. Most of these were directed at Sir Luke Benisty.

The latter allowed the storm to pass over him.

"I refuse to take the responsibility for Chertsey getting away," he said; "it was not by my orders that the servant visited him in the cellar. I would remind you all that what I have promised I would do, I have done. Now my connection with this affair ends." Shrugging his shoulders, he rose from his seat and left the room. He might have added that in any case he had a private engagement in another part of the Chateau.

In that dim light the Chateau de Montais, perched on its towering height, looked like some evil image in stone. And, regarding it, Chertsey felt a wave of dread sweeping through him: was it a live or dead Washburn Rinehart that he would meet inside?

A hand touched his arm.

"Get a hold of this gun, old man," Bill Summers said, passing him a revolver.

"How are we to get in? They will be expecting something or other."

Summers chuckled—grimly.

"Don't worry about that," he rejoined; "one of the French fellows spent his boyhood in this neighbourhood and he knows every inch of the ground. What is more, he knows what he says is a secret way in. Ah! Here he is." A dapper-looking but determined man in the early thirties approached and engaged the chief of the storming party in rapid conversation.

While the two were talking together, another man—a stranger—approached Chertsey.

"Excuse me, sir, but I'm Dwight—Mr. Washburn Rinehart's valet. Can you tell me anything about Mr. Rinehart, sir? Naturally, I'm anxious."

"I can only tell you that when I left the Chateau a couple of hours ago, Mr. Rinehart was still alive. I had to leave to get help. How did you come over?"

"I became worried when I received no word from my Master, and so crossed to Paris. There I went to the American Embassy. When the remarkable news came through from you, sir, to-night, I was permitted to accompany the party."

The talk was interrupted.

"This way—quietly!" ordered the Hon. Bill Summers.

A minute later Chertsey plunged with the rest into a miniature forest of undergrowth.

This must be a dreadful dream! She moved and

had her being—but she had no control over her actions. This brutal woman who was acting as her maid, was forcing her to do what she liked.

Ann put a hand up to her forehead. If only she could think clearly! If only she could regain her will!

"Put this dress on!" ordered the woman who dominated her.

"Why should I?" she heard herself ask in a weak, trembling voice.

"Because, you little fool, you are going to be married!—that's why!"

Married!

Married—to whom?

Everything was spinning round. Hope—a wild, frenzied hope, born of unutterable despair—gripped her so tightly that she felt she would faint. Suppose some miracle had happened! Suppose Gilbert, by some magical means, had gained a mastery in the Chateau, and . . .

Then she sobbed. She realised the gnawing truth. Although the drug she had been given still maintained its hold over her will, her brain was clearing. The real meaning of this mocking masquerade became plain: Benisty, before he left the Chateau was staging another "entertainment" in order to satisfy his sense of malicious jesting.

"Put on these clothes!"

It was useless to resist: the woman looked as though she would kill her if she did not comply. So—the smashing, shattering irony of it!—she was appalled

in a gown of shimmering white satin. On her head the virago of a "dresser" placed a coronet of orange-blossom, and from this hung a long, gossamer veil reaching to the floor. Her feet were encased in dainty silver slippers. On her arm was placed a sheaf of glorious Madonna lilies. . . . And, all the while, she remained powerless to resist ; that was the strangest and most tragical fact of all.

"Now, come with me ! *He* will be waiting !" said the virago. She regarded her handiwork with sardonic approval.

But the door opened and a man stepped in. With a shudder, Ann recoiled from him—for it was her prospective bridegroom.

"My dear, may I say how charming you look ?" remarked Sir Luke Benisty. "I am proud to lead such a bride to the altar."

She could make no reply, for it seemed that her heart had been turned to stone.

"Time presses, or we would be married in Paris," continued Benisty. "As it is, I have arranged for the ceremony to take place in the Chateau. Permit me—your arm, my dear Ann."

A few minutes later she stood in a cold, vault-like room.

"Centuries ago," she heard Benisty say, "this place was used as the private chapel of that noble French family, the de Guichards. To-night, for the first time for two hundred years, a wedding ceremony will be solemnised here. Unfortunately, unforeseen circumstances prevent the principal witness from

being present, but——” he waved his hand ;—“ you know my friends Lade and Snell here ? ”

She saw the two men quite clearly, but, although the moment of her ruin was so rapidly approaching, she was still unable to shake off that fatal lethargy produced by some deadly drug. She was still in a mental trance. She felt like a sleep-walker living through a somnambulistic experience. Whatever was about to happen, she was powerless to prevent it.

Other people entered the Chapel. Amongst these was a mincing-mannered man whom Benisty addressed as “*mon cher Comte*.” It was this man who, grimacing, now came towards her. After fussily arranging her veil, he placed her right hand on his arm and led her towards the small altar where Sir Luke Benisty was already waiting.

Who was to marry them ?

As though in answer to this question, a door to the right opened. A revolting figure appeared. This man was dressed as a priest—but the face was the face of a lecher. Horrible, leering eyes showed above an expanse of unshaven, bloated skin, mottled by drink and debauchery.

“ Ah ! ” said the bridegroom, “ Monsieur le Curé ! ” He took his place by the girl’s side.

The priest walked towards them with drunken, unsteady steps. “*Mes enfants*,” he said, “ are you quite ready ? ”

Ann had a merciful blackness come before her eyes. A terrible weakness overtook her. She leaned back, spent and exhausted.

She heard that loathsome priest chuckle. The next second a sound filled the Chapel.

A man's voice—a voice she felt she recognised—boomed out.

"Hands up everybody!" it said, in a tone of thunder.

Then a whistle blew shrilly—and after that came the sound of rushing footsteps— -

ANN stood rigid, paralysed by a fresh bewilderment. For, as a crowd of men came pouring into the Chapel through the door to the right of the altar, she saw the supposed drunken priest, standing upright and commanding, pointing a revolver straight at Sir Luke Benisty's head !

"The game's up, Benisty!" she heard shouted in a grim, resolute voice ; "you'll be a fool if you cause any more trouble."

Then, her limit of endurance reached, she sank to the stone floor in a deep swoon.

Strong, faithful arms were about her. Opening her eyes, she could scarcely believe what they saw : the man with his face so close to hers was Gilbert Chertsey !

"Ann!—darling!"

Their lips met and clung. In that moment of delirious joy both felt that for the travail they had undergone, ample recompense was now being paid. She was the first to recover normality.

"That priest . . . ?" she started.

Chertsey laughed like one to whom life has become a splendid thing again.

"It was Napoleon Miles," he told her; "you know the fellow—he used to play the guitar and sing at the Rosy Dawn Night Club. That was only a cloak, of course—he is really an American Intelligence man—and the finest chap in the world. We owe everything to him."

"Don't you believe it, Miss Trentham," remarked a familiar voice. Looking up, Ann saw with amazement that the speaker was indeed Napoleon Miles in the flesh. The Secret Service man was still wearing the dress of a priest, but the make-up had been removed from his face.

"I must apologise for giving you such a fright," Miles said penitently, "but, meeting the original priest—a fellow by the name of Pierre Gaudet—and hearing from him of the appointment he had at this Chateau to-night, I decided to play a trick after his own invention off on Benisty."

"It was a masterpiece!" declared Chertsey; "Summers had hinted that you would be knocking around somewhere by the time the fun was on, but, I swear to God, that if you hadn't shouted when you did, I would have shot you down myself!"

Ann interrupted.

"But, Gilbert, Benisty said that you were a prisoner here."

Again the pealing laugh rang out.

"And so I was . . . until a few hours ago. But I managed to get out of the filthy cellar—where our mutual friend is now resting himself in company with about a dozen other choice blackguards, all

rounded up nice and shipshape and Bristol fashion by Bill Summers and his crowd—and—oh, my dear, what does anything else matter now?"

"What indeed?" smiled Napoleon Miles, as he turned away.

It was a distinguished and notable gathering which met half an hour later in the huge Chateau library. All the prisoners had been taken to Paris, and communication with both London and the French capital was being maintained continuously by means of the enemy's captured wireless.

Sir William Bagot looked happier than he had done for many days past.

"I am convinced," he told Washburn Rinehart, who, solicitously attended by the faithful Dwight, had summoned up sufficient strength to attend this conference, "that the plans of these plotters, gigantic as they are, will now be abandoned. You will not have suffered in vain, sir. What these people were banking on was the certainty of striking a sudden blow. They reckoned as well on the help of America—an America tyrannised and controlled by the Money Kings of Wall Street. Their psychology was ludicrous in its crass stupidity, but there you are!"

"They hoped to force the States to get control of Canada's wheat, thus endangering England's food supplies. The result might have been deplorable."

Sir William glanced across at the speaker.

"France and Great Britain will never be sufficiently grateful to you, Mr. Miles," he said. "When every-

one else had failed, you were able to locate this nest of vipers. Please tell us how?"

Napoleon Miles acknowledged the compliment with a slight smile.

"It was comparatively easy," he replied. "One of my friends is a journalist on the Paris staff of the *New York Sentinel*. His speciality is the Underworld and those who live in it. When every other means to trace Benisty had failed, I decided to go to the sewers of crime. My friend told me about a certain haunt called the Lapin Blanc. He advised me not to go alone—but I went. Disguised as an Apache, I had rather an exciting evening. It was at the Lapin Blanc," continued the speaker, "that I met a discredited priest, Pierre Gaudet. In his drunken state he babbled about 'marrying' an English *milord* at a certain historic Chateau not far from Paris. This line of inquiry seemed to be worth following up, and so I accompanied Gaudet to his so-called home. There, applying a certain physical pressure, I got the whole story out of him. After that, I thought it would be rather a neat idea to come here 'made-up' as Gaudet.

"It was such a marvellous impersonation," testified Gilbert Chertsey, who was sitting next to Ann Trentham, his arms supporting her, "that it deceived Benisty himself."

Sir William Bagot drummed his fingers on the table.

"That man must have been half-crazed," he said: "why should he want to stage such a farce as this

mock-marriage when he must have felt that so long as he stayed in the Chateau his skin was in danger?"

"I can answer that, sir," broke in Gilbert Chertsey. "Luke Benisty was not normal. He had a mania for ascertaining how people would behave in certain situations. He had a cruel, malicious streak in him. In this respect he was undoubtedly unbalanced. I have no doubt that being discharged from the British Foreign Office years ago bred in him a positive hatred for his country."

"Our people had to discharge him—first he was a crook, and then he became a traitor," put in the Hon. Bill Summers, looking across at Ann Trentham.

The British Ambassador rose and crossed to Ann's side.

"Trust me, Miss Trentham, to see that your father's honour is completely vindicated. I happen to know the whole story. The person, Barrington Snell, who has turned against his former friends, like others of his type, has proved useful, thoroughly despicable as he is. He is ready to swear that your father was killed—'murdered' would be perhaps the more correct term—by Sylvester Lade, acting under the instructions of Sir Luke Benisty."

"Who were the men Thibau and Lefarge?" asked Chertsey. "My God! I hope they have been taken—that devil Thibau nearly killed me!"

"They are safe in a Paris prison by this time," Napoleon Miles assured him. "And all the rest of that German-Russian gang."

One of the representatives of the French Government supplied the information about the pale shadow.

"The man Thibau has been many things," he observed; "and none of these has been very creditable. He was assistant to a doctor who was struck off the medical register; he was private secretary to a financier who is now serving a long term of imprisonment for embezzlement, and he was also connected with the Defeatist Party during the War. Lefarge was a cosmopolitan scoundrel."

"And le Comte René de Guichard?" inquired Chertsey. He was unable to keep the sneer out of his voice.

The French official waved protesting hands.

"Mon Dieu!" he cried, passionately; "is it only in France that impoverished noblemen sell their souls to the Devil for money?"

Even in this age of publicity, some of the greatest secrets never get into the newspapers. So it was that Europe which had been tottering on the brink of a precipice never learned its danger. Both the French and British Governments acted with admirable tact and discretion. The Press of both countries were called to a conference, at which the facts of the amazing position were placed plainly before them. Patriotism overcame even the tremendous news-craving of the listeners, and the result was that not a line about the great International drama was printed.

In a tiny villa perched precariously on the heights overlooking Cannes, a girl and a man were endeavouring to forget everything of the past in the joy of the present.

"Darling," said Ann to her husband, "we have been here a month, and you haven't written a line!"

The sluggard raised himself and yawned.

"I'm really going to start a new book to-night, sweetheart."

"A thriller?"

Gilbert Chertsey rose and walked to her chair.

"No—a love story."

He bent to kiss her.

THE END

